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TALBOT'S STRONG HAND ON THE REIN CAUSED THE HORSE TO REAR THE MOMENT THE FLASH CAUGHT HIS EYE.

Dick Talbot, the Ranch King;

OR,

THE DOUBLE FOE.

A Romance of the Hawks of Cababi.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
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CHAPTER I.

THE HAWK'S ROAST.

AN October moon—the "Hunter's Moon,"—looked upon a wild picture, of a wild, romantic glade on the head-waters of the North Fork of the Rio Alter, a stream which rises near the Arizona line in the province of Sonora.

Within the glade was a small encampment—rude huts of pine boughs, and fires blazing here and there. Over some of these fires iron kettles were suspended, from out of which came a savory smell.

Scattered about the fires were some thirty men, the most of whom seemed to be Mexicans, although dark faces among them betrayed the half-breed, and some light-skinned fellows, clearly Americans or Europeans.

In the center of the camp was a corral, where some forty horses impatiently pawed the earth.

The glade was narrow, hardly an eighth of a mile wide; entrance to it could be had only from the north or south, following the course of the river, for on the east and west the ground rose so precipitous that only a mountain goat could hope to scale the pine-clad hillsides.

At each approach a mounted sentinel was posted, a good quarter of a mile from the camp.

Near the center of the glade was a hut, double the size of the rest, apart from the others. This was guarded by a sentinel, and was evidently the quarters of the man in command.

Before this hut burned a camp-fire, which illuminated the interior of the quarters.

Within was a rudely constructed table, a comfortable bed, formed of pine boughs, with blankets spread over them, and a couple of camp-stools.

Before the open door sat a middle-aged man with a round, smooth face, cleanly shaven—a decided contrast to the rest, for every man was more or less bearded.

He was of rather portly build, was dressed like an American rancher, and resembled an honest farmer, but evidently was a man of importance in the camp, for, as he sat, smoking a cigarette, a big fellow, of the Mexican border ruffian type, swaggered up, and, giving a military salute, asked:

"Do you expect the captain back to-night, lieutenant?"

"Yes, I look for him every moment now."

"And will we move to-night?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well, I am glad of it, for provisions are running low."

"We will have a fresh supply before morning. Hark!" and the speaker listened.

"Don't you hear the sound of hoofs coming up from the south?"

"Yes," replied the big fellow, listening.

"That is the captain. Give the men a hint to hurry through with their meal, and look to their arms, for the chances are we will be on the move inside of two hours."

"The boys will be mighty glad to hear it, for they are disgusted with their failure this afternoon."

"Oh, well, we cannot strike it right every time; there must be some blanks as well as prizes," the other replied.

The sound of the horse's hoofs could plainly be heard. The noise had attracted the attention of the men, but from the fact that no alarm had been given by the sentinel all understood that it was no foe.

The big fellow hurried away to impart his news, and many exclamations of satisfaction followed as the word passed from man to man.

Up from the southward came a horseman whose appearance would have excited attention anywhere.

The horse was a jet-black stallion of rare beauty, a large muscular animal, evidently speedy, and possessing the stamina to endure a deal of hard work.

The rider was a man of twenty-five or thereabouts, a Mexican, rather lighter in color than the majority of his countrymen, but with the black eyes and hair common to his race.

He was a handsome fellow, the beau ideal of a cavalier, and his well-knit form gave evidence that he possessed unusual strength.

His dress was that worn by Mexican gentlemen—the proprietors of broad acres and many cattle, ornate and rich but serviceable.

As the horseman rode into camp he slackened his pace, and the men, rising, saluted in military fashion, as he passed, the rider returning the salute with the air of a prince.

Reaching the large hut, the sentinel presented arms, the portly man, who had been addressed as lieutenant, saluted, having risen; the cavalier dismounted; a trooper sprung forward and took the black charger by the bridle.

"Give him water and a feed," the horseman added, "and rub him down well, for we move in two hours."

The rider then entered the hut, the lieutenant following.

"Light a candle and close the door," the new-comer commanded, seating himself by the table.

The lieutenant hastened to obey. The candle was lit and placed upon the table, reposing in a massive golden candlestick, curiously carved, which evidently had once formed part of the ornaments of some mission church.

The "door" to the hut was closed by the simple expedient of letting down a blanket.

"Now get out a bottle of wine, for I've had a long ride and am parched with thirst," the cavalier ordered.

Under the couch of boughs was a small excavation, about the size of an ordinary trunk, with a wooden cover, over which pine boughs were so arranged, that no one would suspect there was anything underneath.

From this receptacle the second in command produced a bottle of champagne and a golden goblet elaborately chased, evidently the spoil of some sacred shrine.

"Another goblet, man! Do you suppose I drink alone?" the cavalier demanded.

"Draw up your chair and sit down, for I have quite a tale to relate," continued the captain.

The lieutenant complied.

The other drawing the bowie-knife from his belt, with a single dexterous stroke, knocked off the neck of the bottle, then poured the foaming wine into the goblets.

"Here's luck to trade and confusion to our enemies!" exclaimed the superior, as he raised the golden cup.

The other nodded and the toast was drank. Again the captain filled the goblets, and reproved the other for not drinking faster; he had dispatched his wine at a single draught, while the other had taken his time over it.

Again were the goblets emptied and refilled. "There, now, my throat feels natural again," the new-comer declared. "I have had a long and dusty ride. Where do you suppose I have been?"

"To the southward, I know, but, as to the exact point, whether to the east or west, is a puzzle, for you did not confide anything to me in regard to the trip before you started."

"Well, I was a little uncertain myself where I should go, and so said nothing about the matter. John Gallego was in the camp this morning."

"Yes, I know it. I happened to be down the valley when he came up, as I passed through our lines."

"Ah, yes, I remember now; he told me that you did. John is an honest fellow, you know, and devoted to me."

"And with good reason, for you have done him many favors," the other exclaimed.

"Tis but the carrying out of my plan to always have the common folks regard me as a friend and not as an enemy. There is sound sense in that idea."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that."

"Well, John brought me word that Colonel Jose de Janos, with a regiment of cavalry, some five hundred strong, had arrived at Alter, and that his Excellency, Don Phillip Torres, Governor of the province of Sonora, was expected there to-day; and as a loyal citizen, you know, I deemed it my duty to call upon the governor and bid him welcome."

The lieutenant gave a loud whistle of astonishment.

CHAPTER II.

PLANNING THE RAID.

THE captain laughed at this expression of amazement.

"You did not expect a movement of that kind on my part, eh?"

"Decidedly not! Why, you were putting your head into the lion's mouth!"

Again the captain laughed, as he answered:

"It is the bold game that always wins, and on that idea I act."

"You surely did not penetrate to the governor's presence!" the other exclaimed.

"Indeed I did!"

"But were you not afraid of being recognized?"

"Oh, no; it is several years since I have been in the town of Alter in my own proper person."

"But your black stallion—there is not another beast like him in all Sonora!"

"Well, El Giro would be apt to be recognized," the captain admitted. "But I was not foolish enough to ride the horse into the town, but made my entry mounted on one of our native mustangs, a pretty, spotted beast such as a gay young rancher would straddle. This steed I procured at the ranch of our good friend, John Gallego, where El Giro was left, and when I sought the governor's presence it was as Michael Gallego, a cousin of John, residing on a ranch near Cobota."

"It was a bold game."

"Yes, I waited upon the governor to see if

some relief could not be had from the exactions of the notorious bandit, Fernando Bernal, who, with his outlaw band, the 'Hawks of Cababi,' pressed with a heavy hand upon all ranchers who were well-to-do."

"By all the saints! a bolder game I never heard of!" the lieutenant declared.

"Yes, and I flatter myself I played it well, too!" the captain exclaimed, exultingly, draining his glass and refilling it again.

"The governor received me with a deal of graciousness. I don't suppose you have ever met his Excellency, Don Phillip Torres, the high and mighty governor of this fair province of Sonora?"

"No, I cannot say that I have ever had that pleasure; I admit I should like to, though; and, too, I should like very much to enjoy the satisfaction of crying 'Hands up!' to the noble governor on the road some time, with a dozen or two of our bold boys to back my game," the lieutenant responded with grim humor.

"Ah, yes, that would be a joke, indeed, and, mayhap, such a thing may come to pass before his high and mighty Excellency returns to his noble mansion at Guaymas!"

"But to resume my tale: when I made my complaint in regard to the reign of terror which this remorseless bandit, Fernando Bernal, has brought upon this section of the province of Sonora, his Excellency was pleased to inform me that it was in order to put a stop to the depredations of this ladrone he had come from Guaymas."

"Humph! every one knows that he did not come up here on a pleasure trip!" the lieutenant declared.

"Ah, there you are wrong, for that is the exact light in which his Excellency, the high and mighty governor, regards the trip!" the other exclaimed.

"You understand, the trapping of this rascal of a brigand will be a very easy matter now that the governor and his pet soldier, Colonel Jose de Janos, have undertaken the task."

"What sort of a man is this Colonel Janos? Did you meet him?"

"Oh, yes; the governor took pains to introduce me. He is a curled darling of fortune; a man who has risen to the grade of colonel, thanks to the influence of his family, who have—as the Americans would say—a great pull at the capital with the President and the War Department. The fellow has never been in a fight in his life, and I doubt if he knows how to bring his regiment into battle array, but, he thinks he knows all about the art of war, and in this expedition all that troubles him is the fact that these miserable bandits will not stand up and give battle like men, but will have to be hunted out of their hiding-places like so many cowardly coyotes!"

An angry look appeared on the face of the lieutenant, and his lips drew back, showing his teeth like a dog about to bite.

"I see by the expression upon your face, my dear fellow, that you do not agree with this gallant soldier in his estimate of these wretched outlaws," the captain remarked in a peculiar way which had a strong reminder of the purr of an angry cat.

"The ranchers in the northern part of this province of Sonora could tell him better than that," the other remarked. "They are good men and have shown that they knew how to fight in many a bloody conflict with the redskins, and yet, although they have banded together to exterminate the Hawks of Cababi, they have been well-whipped in every contest."

"Ah, yes, but do you not understand?" with a sarcastic smile. "These are regular Mexican troopers, and their colonel is a man who fancies that he is a second Napoleon."

"He may not have as good an opinion of himself after this campaign is ended," the lieutenant suggested.

"I endeavored to explain that we ranchers hereabouts regarded Bernal and his Hawks of Cababi as being dangerous foes; the colonel replied, with magnificent disdain, that there was all the difference in the world between regular soldiers, such as he commanded, and undisciplined ranchers, but, in pity for the man's conceit and ignorance, I explained to him that we ranchers thought this Bernal a rather smart rogue; told him how Bernal robbed the rich and gave to the poor, and, as a natural result, it was impossible to get any of the small ranchers, who had their places in the hills, where the Hawks found refuge, to give any information in regard to the bandits. In fact, they most certainly would lie to serve him if they had the chance."

"A sound thrashing will open his eyes, but five hundred men is a large force, unless they can be divided and beaten in detail," the other observed.

"There is not five hundred," the captain replied. "I took careful note of their camp, and, in my judgment, there is not over a hundred and fifty men in the command, all told. The five hundred men story is an exaggeration to frighten these timid Hawks of Cababi and cause them to take to their wings."

The lieutenant laughed contemptuously.

"Does the donkey think that Bernal's men

are made of such stuff that they can be frightened by a shadow?"

"Yes, but he is young yet and will probably learn wisdom by the time his beard grows. As for the governor, he will never know anything if he lives until his beard reaches the ground."

"I had a very pleasant interview—won their good opinion by agreeing with everything they said, and departed, bearing with me their cordial invitation to come again."

"The game now, I suppose, is, by means of false reports, to induce this wonderful colonel to divide his forces, then fall upon the separate parties, and give them a beating which will amply prove to them that the Hawks of Cababi have beaks and claws as well as wings."

"Yes, for I feel in the humor to give this pompous governor and purse-proud colonel a lesson which they will never forget. Had it not been for men like them I might now be an officer of the Mexican Army, respected and honored, instead of a hunted outlaw with a price upon my head," the captain responded, in a tone full of bitterness; "but, enough of the governor and the colonel at present; we have other fish to fry."

"We move to-night, then, as you anticipated?"

"Yes, I saw your spy, Durango Joe, and he has smelt out a rich booty for us."

"Aha! that is good!" and the lieutenant rubbed his hands in glee. "That fellow, Durango Joe, is a cunning rascal! He is almost worth his weight in gold."

"He is a shrewd fellow, and has a wondrous eye for business. This estate he has picked out as being worth our while to attack is situated about half-way between Arivaca and Cababiville."

"Yes, yes, that is over the American line in Arizona."

"Exactly; and when the news of an attack reaches these doughty Mexicans, it will perplex them, for they imagine we are operating over toward the Gulf."

"I see, I see!"

"This estate is owned by a wealthy American, a new-comer in this neighborhood, but he has gone into the cattle business on such a scale that they call him the Ranch King."

"Quite a lofty title."

"Yes, Durango Joe said that we will be likely to secure a rich booty, for the man is said to be rolling in wealth."

"We will surprise the ranch, of course."

"Certainly; there will not be any trouble about that. Durango Joe has secured employment there, and will be on the watch to open the gate to us."

"Ah! as I have said before, that fellow is almost invaluable!" the lieutenant declared.

"Yes, and the scoundrel has such an honest look, too; one would think butter would hardly melt in his mouth, and that is why he is so useful."

"Does this Ranch King have the reputation of keeping much money in the house?" asked the other, a covetous glitter in his eyes.

"On that point Durango Joe could not speak with certainty, but he said that the Ranch King always had a big roll of bills, and his wife wore fine diamonds when she attended a party at a neighbor's house."

"Ah, yes, diamonds are good! Much value in a little space!"

"And then, another point: As this Ranch King is said to be so wealthy I thought it would be a good idea to carry off his wife and hold her for a ransom. She ought to be worth a good twenty thousand dollars!"

"True! the idea is a magnificent one. How is this American called?"

"Richard Talbot."

"I never heard of him. Will he fight, do you suppose?"

"He will not have the chance; he is away, at the mining town of Silveropolis, on business."

"So much the better."

"Get out another bottle and we will drink success to the raid."

The command was obeyed.

Two hours later, the brigands were in the saddle and en route for the doomed hacienda of Dick Talbot, the Ranch King.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN WHO CAME THREE THOUSAND MILES.

THE Cababi mountain-range is in Southern Arizona, not a great distance from the line which separates the Territory from the Mexican province of Sonora.

The range runs north and south, with a slight trend to the west from its southern starting-place.

It is a wild and desolate country, thinly settled, although the three almost parallel mountain-ranges, the Sierra Tucson, the Cababi Mountains and the Mohawk Range are known to be rich in precious metals, but the wild warriors of the fierce Apache nation, who have always hunted through this district, looked with angry eyes upon the intrusion of the white men, and it was not until the power of their tribe was broken by repeated contests with the Govern-

ment troops that settlers there were able to live in peace.

Rich copper discoveries had been made at the northern end of the range, and a camp had sprung up which bore the appropriate name of Copperopolis.

Silver had been struck in the foot-hills at the extreme southern end, and lo! like Aladdin's palace, the flourishing town of Silveropolis rose, if not in a single night, in a very few weeks.

Silveropolis was but a mining-camp, pure and simple, although a flourishing one.

Like all such towns, Silveropolis was richer in saloons than anything else, and the principal one, saloon, restaurant and gambling-hell combined, was called the Silver Ship, presided over by a big, "hairy" fellow, red of face and gruff in speech, who was known as Skipper Bill.

He was well on in life; claimed to have sailed the "salt seas" for more years than he had fingers and toes, until, disgusted at the inroads steam had made on the old-fashioned sailing crafts, he quit a "life on the ocean wave," and settled down as the keeper of a house of entertainment for man and beast.

A rougher old customer than Skipper Bill no man ever ran across; he swore like a pirate, and interlarded his conversation with the most outlandish sea jargon.

As nobody in those wild camps takes any stock in any man's story about what his life had been before he struck Arizona soil—that fact did not deter the Skipper from lugging his ridiculous sea phrases in to convince everybody that he was a genuine old salt.

It was on the night of the scene in the mountain glade, already delineated, that we introduce the Silver Ship and its inmates.

A miner who had just lost his last dollar at the faro-table, being troubled with a raging thirst, had had the audacity to "brace" the burly proprietor for a drink.

"What, you piratical land-lubber!" roared Skipper Bill. "Blast my tarry toptights! give you a drink and you will squar' it some other time! Shiver my timbers! What sort of a cook's galley do you take this craft for, anyway?"

"Oh, you needn't make sich a row!" cried the man, indignantly. "Keep yer durned old p'ison!" and he departed in a rage.

"Come back and say that ag'in, you larboard-headed son of a marlingspike!" cried the host, in wrath. "Twist my jibboom! if I had ye here I would pour sich a broadside inter you that yer sab-sided leetle buan-boat would sink to Davy Jones's locker in a brace of shakes!"

Attracted by the loud tone, a man quitted his position at the chuck-a-luck game, which was running at the far end of the saloon, and came forward to see what was the matter.

The movement brought him face to face with a person who had just entered the saloon, and with a cry of recognition the two clasped hands.

The new-comer was a well-built fellow of twenty-eight or thirty years, although he looked older, for his face betrayed the lines which told of a life of dissipation.

He was blue-eyed and light-haired, and a good judge of nationalities would have set him down for an Englishman.

His garb was rough and worn, but the unmistakable air about him betrayed the gentleman, born and bred.

The other, although rather flashily dressed evidently was a man who could not boast of his birth or parentage, although he was not a bad-looking fellow with his black, curling hair, tolerably regular, though rather coarse features and carefully-dressed beard and mustache.

He looked like a person vain of his personal appearance, and yet there was something mean-looking about him.

One of the best known sports of Silveropolis was he, by name Thomas Kidd, but this had been changed to Curly Kid, and by that appellation was he usually distinguished.

"Well, well!" cried the gambler, as he shook hands with the new-comer, "you are about the last man I expected to see!"

"I can hardly say the same of you, for it is nothing strange to run across one of your calling in a flourishing mining-camp like this," the other replied.

"True enough; where dwells the guileless there you will run across men of guile. In other words, where carrion is, there also is the vulture!"

"Can we get a table here somewhere, in a quiet corner, where we can sit down, have a drink and talk over old times?"

"Yes, there is a private room in behind the bar where poker parties flourish, but play will not commence for an hour yet, and we can have it all to ourselves until then."

"I'll stand that; get a bottle of wine," and the speaker handed the sport a five-dollar gold piece.

"Wine, eh? You must be in luck!" Curly Kid exclaimed.

"Yes, I have no reason to complain; but, get the wine and come on! I am glad I chanced to run across you, for I have a scheme to propose

in which I need your help, and in which there is big money."

"Then I am the man you are looking for!" acquiesced the sport, and ordering the wine, he led the way into the private room.

The two sat down at a table, the waiter served the wine and withdrew.

"As I observed, you must be in good luck to afford such extravagance as this!" the gambler remarked as the wine foamed in the glasses.

"You are right; I am," the Englishman replied. "And, here's to better luck to you, too, for I judge by your words that you are not over and above fortunate, just now."

They took a draught of the wine, and then Curly Kid made reply:

"Well, you are about right there, although I ought not to complain, for I am making a good living; but, I say, where have you been for the last year?"

"Let me see; it is just about a year since we parted in California," the other observed, musingly.

"Yes, just about, and you disappeared as mysteriously as the demon in the pantomime when he goes down a trap-door. We parted at night—or rather, to speak correctly, about three o'clock in the morning, after a high old spree. You said you were nearly dead broke—only four bits left with which to get a cocktail and a bite of something to eat in the morning, and begged me to make a raise if I could for you."

"And did you succeed in doing it?" asked the Englishman, evidently interested in this recollection.

"I struck a little poker party and a streak of luck; a couple of hours after I drew out of the game fifty ducats ahead; but, in the morning, when I searched for you, nary trace in all 'Frisco could I find of my pard, English Ben."

"Well, old fellow, I am just as much obliged to you as if you had found me and shared your fifty ducats with me."

And the Briton shook hands warmly with the gambler.

"Oh, that is all right! You would have done as much for me. We worked in double harness about as well as any two sports I ever saw. Do you know, I really had an idea that you had become desperate from your run of ill luck, and had concluded to jump the game? Honest! I watched the newspapers for quite a while, thinking I would see an account of the discovery of your body, picked up in the bay somewhere."

"I was pretty hard pushed, but not as badly as all that," the Englishman replied. "But my luck turned just then. In the morning I was up early and got my drink and a bite to eat, and, in the restaurant, I happened to see in a newspaper that a letter was advertised for me at the post-office. I got it; it was from my elder brother in England. In it was a draft for fifty pounds and an injunction to come home immediately, and then he explained about a certain change which had taken place in our family matters. An hour later I was on the train for New York."

"Quick work!" the gambler suggested.

"Yes, the circumstances demanded it. I never told you much about my life," the Briton observed, abruptly.

"No, my dear fellow, you did not, intimate as we were. I knew you were an Englishman, and that you came of a good family, for everything about you betokened the gentleman. I felt pretty sure that your name was no more Ben England than mine is Curly Kid, but in this country it is not considered polite to express doubts in regard to men's handles."

"Very true. Well, your suspicion was correct; Ben England or English Ben is only an assumed name, and I do come of a good family."

"My dear fellow, any one who knows you would be sure of that!"

"I am the black sheep of my family. There are two brothers of us; and, as I have the misfortune to be the younger, under our cursed English law, when my father died, the elder brother became rich, while I had nothing but a small income, not at all sufficient for a man of my habits. I went to the bad rapidly, drifted to this country, and finally to the Pacific Slope."

"Yes, and a rough time you had of it."

"You bet! Well, this letter told me of an important change in our family affairs. A rich uncle had died without male issue, and, as the next of kin, my brother had succeeded to the estates and title—an income of fifty thousand pounds a year and the title of the Earl of Derwentwater!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE AMBUSH.

THE gambler leaned back in his chair and surveyed his companion in astonishment.

"Why, old pard, this is a regular fairy tale that you are giving me."

"Yes, it sounds like one, I know, but it happens to be true."

"An earl and fifty thousand pounds a year! Whew! Let me see: a pound is about five dollars, isn't it?"

The other nodded.

"Then that is nearly two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year."

"That is the figure."

"Well, I think that even a man of my luxurious tastes might be able to rub along on that," Curly Kid remarked. "But, I say, where do you come in?"

"I don't come in at all, legally. As a younger son my share is nix."

"What a deuce of a law!"

"Yes, but my brother did not send all the way to the Pacific Slope and bring me home to starve while he was rolling in wealth."

"I should imagine not."

"My brother is a good-hearted fellow, only he is a cad—you know what that means?"

"Yes, what we call a muf."

"Exactly! He has paid my debts and set me on my legs a half a dozen times, until, finally, he gave me a hundred pounds and banished me to America, telling me to go and get killed as soon as possible and not disgrace the family name any more."

"Brotherly counsel," exclaimed the gambler with a grin.

"He had become disgusted with my wild oats and swore I should have no more money out of him. But, when this windfall came, he relented, and, as he wrote, a plan came to him by means of which I could be got on my legs and be a gentleman once more."

"Aha! now you are getting interesting."

"The Earl of Derwentwater, who died without male issue, whereby my brother inherited, was named Reginald Carford Broughton. I was named Reginald after him—a shrewd device of my parents to cause me to be remembered by my wealthy relative."

"But it did not work, eh?"

"No; he never liked me, although I ought to have been a favorite, for he was something of a black sheep too."

"In his youth he led a wild life, came to America, lived for some time on the Pacific Slope, and married a wife here by whom he had a daughter; he too was then a younger son, with no hope of succeeding to the estates and title; but, just about the time of the birth of this child, whether just before or after I know not, death swept away all who stood between him and fortune and he became the Earl of Derwentwater."

"Yes, yes, I see. This is as interesting a romance as I ever struck," the gambler observed.

"Incontinently he deserted this Californian wife and child, hurried back to England, took possession of the estate, and, in time, married again. Of course no one in England knew that he had been married in this country, if he really was married here legally, of which there seems to be no proof."

"He had children—all died—his wife died, and then, after years, he came to this country in search of the wife and child he had deserted. The wife was dead, the child living, but she didn't cotton to the father who had shook her mother, to use your Americanisms, and would not return to England and share his wealth. He returned alone, and within a month after landing was a dead man."

"My brother was summoned to his death-bed and learned these facts from the lips of the dying man."

"I have an idea that Reginald Broughton made a will, leaving a good bit of money to his daughter, and that my brother managed to collar that will in some way and destroyed it. He is none too good to do a trick of that kind if there wasn't any danger of a discovery."

"Oh, yes; a good many of our leading citizens would be in the State Prison if they got their deserts for just such secret crimes."

"I am sure there is something crooked about the business, for my brother is troubled about the girl, and that is why he sent for me. He had a proposition to make. If I would find and marry her he would settle five thousand pounds a year on us for life."

"Twenty-five thousand dollars, eh? Gods! I would be willing to marry almost any woman to corral a sum like that!" Curly Kid averred.

"Yes; and, in addition, he would present me with a thousand pounds on my wedding-day."

"You accepted the offer, of course?"

"Oh, I jumped at it! If the woman had been as old as the hills and as ugly as the fabled Gorgons, I would not have hesitated; but, according to the father's description, she was young and beautiful, rarely attractive, educated at a convent-school, but, owing to the death of her mother, had been obliged to look out for herself, and being of an independent, daring nature had opened a saloon in a mining-camp in the district known as No Man's Land."

"Yes, yes; I know the locality well."

"She bore the name of 'Frisco Nell'."

"It seems to me as if I had heard of her," Curly Kid remarked. "I had a pard once who was named Curly Bill Peters, and it strikes me that he was mixed up in some way with a beautiful woman named 'Frisco Nell'. He was a close-mouthed chap, though, and never said much about his personal affairs."

"After accepting my brother's offer I hurried to America in search of the girl, going directly to No Man's Camp, but, when I arrived there, I

discovered she had sold out her saloon and gone; no one could tell me where, although it was surmised that she and a man named Richard Talbot had departed together, for he had closed up his interests in the town just about the same time. Rumor suggested that the two had gone off together to get married, as it was suspected that there had been a love affair between them."

"Rather unpromising news for you," Curly Kid suggested.

"Well, yes; although as far as I was concerned I didn't care if the girl had had a dozen husbands, so I could get her in the end. It was the money attached to Nell, and not the maid herself, that I was after."

"Of course; you merely accepted the woman as a necessary evil."

"Quite right! Well, I followed in pursuit, and have been at it until now, when I succeeded, just by accident, in locating my birds."

"The man and woman are together, then?"

"Yes, and married. This Talbot has a big ranch north of Arivaca; so big that he is called the Ranch King, and everybody in the neighborhood thinks he is a very wealthy man."

"Well, then it seems to me that your cake is all dough!" the gambler observed. "If he was a poor man now you might be able to buy his wife."

"Yes, but there isn't any chance of doing anything with the fellow. He is in Silveropolis, now, on business. I have been taking his measure and have come to the conclusion that he is an ugly man to handle in any way."

"Yes, I have run across the fellow, and you are right about his being a tough customer," Curly Kid confessed. "But, by Satan and all his imps! I would make a bold try before allowing such a prize to escape me."

"If you were in my place, what would you do?" asked the Englishman, in almost fiercely earnest tones, leaning across the table.

"Give this Talbot his ticket to the other world and then marry the widow!"

"She might not consent."

"I would carry her off and force her into a marriage!"

"Will you go in with me?"

"You bet!"

And the two men shook hands.

"It will be ten thousand dollars in your pocket when Talbot falls dead, and ten thousand more the day I marry 'Frisco Nell'!"

"It is a bargain! I am your man!"

"How can the trick be worked?" asked the Englishman, anxiously. "Pick a quarrel with the man in the town here?"

"Oh, no; from what I have seen of the fellow I should not advise giving him any chance for his life," Curly replied. "My plan would be to ambush him, as he rides on his homeward road to-morrow. His horse is a peculiar one, white, splashed here and there with red and black spots, what is commonly called a circus, or calico horse."

"Yes, I saw the beast in the corral to-day. It is a fine steed."

"A couple of miles south of Silveropolis the trail which Talbot will follow to-morrow, winds over a small rolling prairie, dotted with little clumps of bushes," the gambler explained. "We can conceal ourselves in the bushes, you to the right and I to the left, each of us with a repeating rifle, and it will be mighty strange if we can't bag our game."

"Yes, that is true," the Briton remarked, thoughtfully. "I cannot see any reason why the scheme should not work."

"There isn't any, and to-morrow we will try it on."

The gambler had a small cabin on the outskirts of the camp and there the two spent the night.

In the morning Curly Kid procured two repeating rifles and a pair of horses, and then the pair set out.

By cautious inquiries at the hotel they had learned that Talbot intended to start for home about ten in the morning.

The brace of assassins reached the rolling prairie.

"How will this answer?" Kid asked.

"Splendidly!" replied the other.

They dismounted and tethered their steeds in a clump of timber on the extreme edge of the prairie, then selected two suitable spots in which to lie in wait for their destined victim.

"Now, then, Mister Dick Talbot, we are ready to give you a quick passage to the other world!" the gambler exclaimed, as he and the Englishman sought concealment amid the bushes.

Time passed. At last came the sound of a horse's hoofs, and soon the animal and rider appeared in sight.

It was Dick Talbot, mounted on a wonderfully beautiful stallion, pure white in color with the exception of black and red splashes.

Talbot was attired in a suit of dark corduroy, pantaloons and coat, but no vest to cover the ruffled shirt; high riding-boots guarded his feet and legs; around his waist a broad belt supporting his revolvers; upon his head the stiff, broad-brimmed sombrero of the Mexican.

He was coming on at an easy canter.

Suddenly the sharp crack of a rifle rung out

on the air, and a puff of white smoke curled up from a clump of bushes a hundred feet away on the right.

Talbot's strong hand on the rein caused the horse to rear the moment the flash caught her eye. Too old an adventurer was he not to understand its meaning.

Lion-hearted Dick Talbot knew that a concealed assassin sought his life.

CHAPTER V.

AN OLD TRICK, BUT AN EFFECTIVE ONE.

A SECOND shot followed the first, the two so near together that one seemed to be but the echo of the other.

The white stallion was standing on his hind legs, pawing wildly in the air with his fore-feet; blood oozed from his shoulder, staining the silk-like hide, showing that the beast had been wounded.

With a sharp cry Talbot plucked one of his revolvers from his belt, and then, throwing up his hands as though badly hurt, he half-slid, half-tumbled from the saddle to the ground.

The horse, released from the grip of his rider, galloped madly away, the pain of the wound making him almost frantic with fear, and soon he disappeared amid the bushes.

Dick Talbot then lay prone upon the ground, resting on his side, his legs drawn up toward his chin, the revolver still clutched in his hand, his head bent down upon his breast, presenting a perfect picture of a man stricken suddenly with death's awful agonies.

The ambushed assassins hesitated for a moment; they wished to be sure that their work was done—their victim rendered incapable of resistance before they ventured from their covert.

As the moments lengthened into minutes and Talbot moved not, they became satisfied that the leaden messengers had done their fearful work, and therefore sprung from their concealment and hastened toward the fallen man.

The Englishman was the nearest to Talbot; it was his rifle which had first broken the stillness of the prairie air; hence he was the first to get within fifty feet of the fallen man, the gambler being some few yards further off.

Then a sudden and wonderful change took place.

The supposed dead man arose abruptly to a sitting posture, and, with a quick snap-shot, apparently not taking aim, fired.

With a yell of dismay Reginald Broughton threw up his hands and pitched forward on his face.

The moment Curly Kid saw that Talbot had been playing 'possum he attempted to cock his rifle.

The gambler evidently was not an old hand at this sort of thing, for he had neglected to cock his gun before advancing, which an old stager would never have left undone; but Talbot's eye was on him and his revolver leveled.

"Down gun, or I will drive a ball right through you," was the stern command.

Curly "wilted;" that terrible dead-shot's command was enough.

"All right; you have got the drop on me, and I am wise enough to know it. Down she goes!" and suiting the action to the word, he dropped the butt of the rifle to the ground.

Then, pretending for the first time to get a good look at Talbot's face, he gave a start of surprise and cried, in well-feigned amazement:

"Great heavens! we have made a mistake!"

"Eh, what's that?" Dick demanded.

"I say we have made a mistake. You are not the man we intended to attack at all!"

"Oh, I am not?"

"No. This has been a most unlucky blunder!" Curly Kid exclaimed, assuming to be deeply excited.

"Yes; the thing didn't work exactly as you anticipated," Talbot remarked, dryly.

"Oh, I don't mean that."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said; you are not the man we were after at all."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, why should we attack you?"

"I really don't know."

"We have nothing against you—neither myself nor that unfortunate English Ben, whom you have laid out for keeps, I reckon."

"I reckon I have; I seldom miss my man if I get a fair chance at him."

"It is an unfortunate mistake, and it has cost that poor wretch his life."

"Say, what are you trying to get at anyway? Do you say that it is a mistake because I have got you cornered and you don't see any way to get out?" Talbot demanded.

"Oh, no; it is a mistake I tell you! Do you know any reason why myself and pard should attack you? You are a stranger to both of us, I reckon; anyway, you are to me."

"Maybe you are short of cash and you selected me for a hold-up?"

"Say, stranger, do I, or this unfortunate man whose hash you have settled for this world, look like road-agents?"

"No, I can't say that you do. You look like

a sport, and this other fellow like a tenderfoot; still, when men are hard up they are apt to try almost any game to raise the wind."

"Neither my pard nor I are in that condition," the gambler protested. "I am tolerably flush, and he has plenty of money. If you doubt my words just examine the state of his leather."

"Oh, I will take your word that he has a full pocketbook," Talbot replied, suspecting some trick in this offer.

"I can show that I am not broke," Curly Kid declared, and he pulled out a roll of bills. "Here's a hundred, at the least. And now I put it to you, as a sensible man, if a fellow as well-heeled as I am would be apt to go into a road-agent game, particularly when it is entirely outside of his line of business. If it was to sit down to skin you at poker, now, it would be an entirely different matter."

Talbot was puzzled by this strange affair, for he could not gainsay the truth of the man's words, and he knew of no reason why the men should attack him except for the purpose of plunder.

"Well, you say this was a mistake—"

"It was! the biggest kind of a blunder!" the gambler persisted.

"Explain how it happened."

"Do you know Dan Dutton—Black Dan Dutton, the ugliest man in a fight in this section?"

"I have not the pleasure of the gentleman's acquaintance. I am a stranger in this region and know very few people."

"Dutton is a sport, and, as I tell you, bears the reputation of being an ugly man in a row. He and I had a 'growl,' the other night, and he threatened to kill me on sight. A threat like that, from a man like Black Dan is enough to make a fellow keep his eyes open, and when myself and pard talked the matter over we came to the conclusion that if I didn't get the drop on Dutton he would get it on me."

"Just by accident, I heard, last night, that Dutton was going down to Arivaca to-day, so we two resolved to lay for him this morning. He has a white horse, something like yours, only not so big, and there are no spots on it, therefore, when you came along, we reckoned you were Dutton, sure, and went for you."

The gambler had ingeniously mingled truth and fiction in this explanation. There *was* such a man as Dan Dutton—he and Curly Kid had quarreled, and Dutton had made threats that he would "go a-gunning" for the gambler some fine day, but the fellow was a braggart, without "sand," and his threats never scared anybody who knew him.

Talbot was in a quandary. It did not seem reasonable that such a mistake could be made, yet, on the other hand, there was no reason, as far as he could see, why such a ferocious attack should be made on him.

"Well, stranger, I must say this beats me," Talbot observed. "I think you are lying, yet why you should go for me, a stranger to you, is the biggest kind of a mystery."

"Pard, you have got it just as straight as a string," the gambler protested; "why should we go for you?"

"I suppose I will have to take your word for it this time, and call the thing square."

"You ought to be satisfied, considering that you have given my pard a ticket to the happy hunting-ground," Curly Kid urged.

"Put down your gun! I'm going to confiscate those two Winchesters," Talbot called out.

"I am not complaining, pard; it is your say-so this time, and if you skinned us completely of all we have got I ought not to say a word," and the gambler laid the rifle on the ground.

"Now, stranger, trot off to the right for three or four hundred feet and sit down—keep seated until I am out of sight."

"Certainly, anything to oblige."

And with a light heart the gambler marched off to the right, fully five hundred feet, where he squatted on the ground.

"All right!" called out Talbot, who at once secured the rifles and started down the trail, hoping soon to find his well-trained horse awaiting his coming.

He was correct in this assumption; a mile or so further on he encountered the steed, and was soon on his back, homeward-bound again.

Curly Kid waited until Dick Talbot was out of sight, arose and walked slowly over to where the unfortunate Englishman lay on the sward.

CHAPTER VI.

MANY A SLIP 'TWEEN CUP AND LIP.

The gambler felt disposed to moralize as he looked upon the body of the Englishman.

"To think of a man coming over three thousand miles to get a deal like this! It is about the roughest thing I ever heard of, and the cute way in which this durned Talbot took us, too! I thought we had him dead to rights. The idea of his playing 'possum was one that never came to me, he worked the trick so nicely. Oh, he did it 'to the queen's taste,' as poor English Ben used to say."

"I suppose I will have to arrange to plant my old pard. It will not do to allow his body to remain here. Poor fellow! he little thought when he set out from England on this expedi-

tion that he was destined to go under on the first try; but such is life.

"Great heavens!"

The sudden exclamation was caused by the fact that the supposed dead man gave utterance to a low moan.

"He hasn't passed in his checks yet! There is still some life left!"

Then down on his knees went Curly, and he bent anxiously over the Englishman.

It was true; the man had not been killed outright, as both Talbot and the gambler believed, and at once Curly set to work to examine the wound.

The man had fallen on his face, so the gambler turned him over on his back. From under the edge of the hat, on his right temple, the blood was slowly oozing.

Curly shook his head.

"I reckon he is done for, after all," he muttered, "for this looks as if he had been shot right through the head."

He removed the hat, however, and with his handkerchief carefully wiped away the blood so he could examine the wound, but, to his surprise, there was no hole made by the ball.

"This is mighty odd!" he muttered.

A further examination disclosed the fact that the leaden missile had merely grazed the skull, tearing the skin, so as to produce a flow of blood, and stunning him.

"Oho! this fellow is worth a dozen dead men yet!" Curly exclaimed, and was further delighted at seeing signs of returning consciousness.

Gradually, indeed, Broughton recovered his senses, and then rose to a sitting position, assisted by the gambler. He looked around him in a dazed sort of way for a few moments.

"Well, old fellow, how are you?" Curly asked.

"Not very well," the other answered, slowly, speaking with difficulty. "My head feels as if it did not belong to me."

"You have had a narrow escape. If the ball, instead of combing your hair, had gone an inch lower down, your account with this world would have been closed."

By this time the mind of the Englishman was working clearly and he understood what had occurred.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "you are right; it was a narrow squeeze!"

"Mighty few men have had as narrow a one and lived to boast of it," the gambler declared.

"A miss is as good as a mile, you know," the Briton remarked, as, with the assistance of the other, he rose to his feet. "Have we made a complete failure?" Broughton continued, as he looked around him for Talbot.

"Yes, a most complete one."

"But, I say, how did *you* get out of the scrape? How comes it that this devil of a Talbot did not finish you, too?"

"Oh, after you went down, and I saw that he had the drop on me, I weakened," Curly replied, and then he related the *ruse* by means of which he had escaped Talbot's vengeance.

"As I said, this fellow is a regular devil," the Englishman exclaimed. "And our attempt to wipe him out was foolhardy in the extreme."

"Well, I did not know anything about this Talbot," the gambler explained. "He is a stranger here, and I took him to be a fair, average kind of man, but I am satisfied now that he is a hummer, and you will not catch a man of my size stocking up against him again. We must hire some galoot who is not particular what he does as long as he gets well paid; and he must be a dead-sure man, too. No more botch in this business, now."

"Very true; we must not fail again," the Englishman assented. "We must select a trusty man; but we must keep ourselves in the background, so that if the scheme fails and Talbot captures the man, the fellow will not be able to betray us as his principals."

"Of course we must look out for *that*, for this Talbot would be just red-hot lightning if he once got the idea that we were going for him."

"I can arrange that all right," Broughton averred. "I have in my trunk at the hotel a fine lot of disguises, with wigs and beards. When you find a likely man we can disguise ourselves and seek him under cover of the darkness."

"A capital idea!" the gambler acquiesced. "We can make our bargain with the tough, and then, if the thing falls through and Talbot corners *him*, the rancher will never suspect that we had aught to do with the matter."

"That is now our game!" the Englishman decided; "so let us get back to Silveropolis as soon as possible. My head must be attended to, for it aches as if it would split."

"Come along, then, and you can depend upon my finding some sport in the camp to work the trick for us!" Curly Kid declared.

The pair retraced their steps to the timber where they had tethered their steeds, which they at once mounted and slowly, and painfully to the Briton, returned to town.

The pair told a plausible tale to account for the wound to the people of Silveropolis. Broughton's horse had taken fright, ran away,

and in passing under the branches of a tree, one of the projecting limbs had scraped the Englishman's head.

The gambler, like the majority of men who lead lives of adventure on the frontier, had had considerable experience in dressing wounds, and so attended to the hurt about as well as a regular doctor would have done.

As soon as Broughton was made comfortable, they consulted as to their man to do the "job" of assassination.

"A Mexican ruffian would be the man, for they are usually cunning and remorseless. Assassination seems to come natural to them," Broughton suggested, "and money will buy them to kill their own mothers."

"You are right there, and I know just the bravo!" the gambler exclaimed—"just the man! I saw him in the camp this morning, and one of his fellows said he was in hard luck just now."

"So much the better!" declared the other.

"He is a half-breed, his father a Mexican and his mother an Apache squaw, and is about as ugly a customer as can be scared up in Arizona. He is called Lope Escato, but years ago he got the nick-name of The Snake, and is seldom called anything else. I will send a messenger for him to-night; we will put on disguises, and the odds are big that he will willingly do the job."

Broughton expressed his satisfaction, and then the two prepared to kill time until night should come.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ATTACK.

SOUTHERN Arizona is but thinly settled, and, as a rule, the ranches are isolated.

Talbot's was most decidedly so, for the nearest house was a good mile away.

It was an old property, dating back to the time when the Mexicans ruled the country, and was built of unburned bricks, "dobies," as they are usually termed.

The house was constructed in the fashion common to the country, with a court-yard in the center, entrance to which was guarded by massive doors.

All the houses near the Indian country had to be built so as to stand a siege as well as provide shelter, for the wild red chiefs regarded the whites as interlopers and were always ready to go on the war-path against them.

When the hardy American miners and cattlemen came into Arizona, though, it did not take the Indians long to discover that they could not bully them as they were in the habit of bullying the Dons.

The Americans were fighters, ready to give blow for blow, and, before many months, the red-skins were driven to the mountains and the fertile plains abandoned to the ranchers.

Still, the Apaches would make raids from their fastnesses upon the ranches, and so, after nightfall, the houses were always carefully closed, and, as the stout 'doby walls and massive gates were proof against any assault weaker than the fire of artillery, the inmates slept in peace.

It was an hour after midnight; the moon was high in the heavens, and its beams fell upon a squadron of armed men, all well-mounted, and moving with the precision of trained soldiers over the prairie toward the lonely ranch of the cattle king.

It was the band of Fernando Bernal, the Hawks of Cababi, as the outlaws termed themselves.

At the head of the cavalcade rode the brigand chief, mounted upon the magnificent black stallion; by his side was the lieutenant, Red Dias.

Both the captain and lieutenant wore false black, long-haired wigs and beards, so as to disguise their features, but the rank and file of the outlaws did not trouble themselves to bother with any disguises.

When the troop came within a thousand yards of the ranch the bandit captain held up his right hand—the signal for a halt, and the riders immediately reined in their steeds.

The brigands had been trained in a silent drill, as oftentimes when on a nocturnal expedition the utterance of a command might lead to an alarm.

"We had better not approach too near the ranch until we ascertain that everything is all right," Bernal remarked.

"Yes, it is a wise precaution, although there is little doubt that our man will do the trick all right," the lieutenant replied. "I will ride forward and see if he is on the alert."

"Do so, and if everything is all right, give the signal for an advance."

The lieutenant nodded, dismounted, gave the horse's rein to one of the men, and then proceeded on foot to the house, the rest sitting motionless in their saddles and watching him.

Red Dias advanced with noiseless tread; all was as quiet as the grave; not a sound gave warning that any one was awake within the house.

There was a barred wicket in the gate, placed there for the express purpose of affording those within an opportunity to inspect any one who applied for admission without being obliged to open the portal.

As the lieutenant came to the gate a dark face appeared behind the bars.

"Aha, is that you, lieutenant?" the man peering through the bars asked in cautious tones.

"It is; you are on the watch, I see."

"Oh, yes; you can always depend upon me. I have been on the lookout for you since midnight."

Then the face disappeared from the wicket, the massive bolts which fastened the doors were cautiously withdrawn, the portal opened and the speaker appeared.

He was a dark, under-sized fellow, with the stolid, wooden-like face peculiar to his race, the peons, or tame Indians, so called to distinguish them from the wild red braves.

The peons are the descendants of the Indians whom the old mission priests succeeded in civilizing, and, in the process, the converts were bereft of about all their manhood, but, like all conquered races, their cunning seemed to be increased.

"Is everything all right?" the lieutenant asked when the man made his appearance.

"Oh, yes; you will not have the least trouble," the herdsman answered. "There are only three men on the place; the rest are absent looking after the cattle."

"That is good, for it saves us the trouble of killing half a dozen of the rascals," the brigand commented. "If they were all here they might be fools enough to think they could beat us off."

"Yes, for there are some good men in the party," the herdsman observed. "One in particular, an Indian, called Mud Turtle, a big, brawny chief of some far-off Northern tribe, a man who would be certain to fight like a very demon. It is well for us that he is not here."

"Well, it would only cost him his life if he was fool enough to attempt to defy our power. If everything is all right I will give the signal for the advance."

"It is; the hacienda is at your mercy."

Red Dias faced about and held both hands up in the air.

Without a word, and with wonderful celerity the outlaws dismounted, then tethered their horses by means of lariats and pins driven into the ground. Two remained to watch the steeds, and the rest advanced with rapid steps, the brigand and captain at their head.

At the gate the party came to a halt.

This movement had been performed with the ease that long practice gives, the outlaws gliding along with noiseless steps like so many grim specters.

Briefly the lieutenant explained how matters stood.

"So far all is well," Bernal remarked. "But, how about getting at our birds? Where are they lodged?"

"The men are in a room on the right of the court-yard," the peon explained. "And Mrs. Talbot's apartment is directly opposite."

"Are the doors bolted or barred?"

"The door to the men's apartment is not, but I do not know about Mrs. Talbot's," was the answer.

"It will be safe to conclude that her door will be fastened," the lieutenant suggested.

"Yes, hardly a doubt of it," Bernal coincided. "A woman, in the absence of her husband, would be sure to secure the door."

"You can easily break it open," the peon added. "Take the tongue out of the wagon yonder," and he pointed to a large farm-wagon in a corner of the yard.

"Yes, but we can probably get her out by the use of a little strategy. First, we will secure the men. Dias, you attend to that," the captain said.

The lieutenant nodded.

"Take a half a dozen men with you bind the fellows and give them warning that if they utter a cry of alarm they will be slain in cold blood."

"I will do the job up all right," Red Dias assured. Then he selected six men and entered the court-yard, the peon leading the way and indicating the door which the force immediately entered.

The captain and the rest of the outlaws had followed the others into the yard.

"Is that the door?" asked Bernal, pointing to one exactly opposite the entrance where Red Dias and his men had gone.

"It is."

"Range up against the wall in the corners, men, so that it will not be possible for any one to see you through the grating of the door."

All the doors looking on the court-yard were arranged, like the outer ones, with barred wickets.

The brigands obeyed the command.

"Now, then, rap on the door and tell your mistress that you wish she would dress herself and come out, for there are some suspicious-looking men prowling around the house, and you think they are not here for any good purpose."

The peon grinned and nodded, while Bernal flattened himself against the wall, by the side of the door, so that when it opened he could spring in.

The peon rapped cautiously on the door—

waited for a minute or two, and then rapped again.

The rustle of a woman's dress could be heard within; then a face appeared behind the bars.

"What is it—who knocks?" was the question, in the most musical of tones, and the sounds caused the brigand to listen intently, for never had he heard a voice which pleased his ear better.

"It is I, Jose, the peon," the man replied.

"What do you want at this late hour?" asked the woman, in a voice full of suspicion and distrust.

"I was awakened by a noise without the hacienda, and upon getting up discovered some men lurking around the house, and it is my idea that they are not there for any good purpose."

"Wake the other men immediately!"

"I have," replied the cunning rascal, without a moment's hesitation, "but they are panic-stricken with fear and refuse to come out."

"In that case, then, it would be foolish for me to venture," the lady replied, in tones which plainly betrayed that she mistrusted the faithfulness of the peon.

"I am in perfect safety here, protected by a strong door, and I am well armed, too," she continued. "If any one should attempt to force the door, it will cost them their life."

The brigand chief saw that the scheme would not work; the woman could not be tricked, and open force alone would avail.

"Stepping forward he gave the command:

"Seize him!"

And the outlaws, understanding what was desired, made a pretense of seizing and dragging the peon away.

"Madam, you are in the hands of Bernal and his Hawks of Cababi!" the outlaw cried. "Open the door or you will repent it!"

For answer the woman fired a shot through the window that came within an inch of the outlaw's head.

"Stand ready, three or four of you, to shoot this woman if she attempts to fire again, and the rest get the tongue out of the wagon and break in the door!"

The outlaws hurried to comply with the command.

The tongue was detached from the wagon and placed in position, grasped by four sturdy fellows.

"For the last time, will you surrender?" cried the brigand.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNDAUNTED WOMAN.

THE outlaw chief had an idea that when Mrs. Talbot saw he intended to break in the door she would save him the trouble by opening it, but she was made of sterner stuff than he anticipated.

"No, I will not surrender!" she replied, defiantly.

"You are not wise to provoke me by a useless resistance," the brigand warned angrily.

"Be that as it may, I will resist while I have the power," the determined woman declared.

"Your blood be on your own head then, if you are killed in the struggle!" Bernal replied. "You do not seem to understand that you are helpless in my power. All the men in the ranch are now my prisoners. Not a soul is there here to aid you."

"I have a pair of revolvers, and I am not afraid to use them!" she retorted. "You may be able to break in the door, but the men who attempt to enter after it is broken in will do so at the risk of their lives."

An angry scowl appeared upon the face of the outlaw chief as he listened to this declaration. This was getting to be serious business. The woman was apparently desperate, and from her determined tone he believed she would be as good as her word.

It nettled the bandit, for he had met few men during his stormy career who had dared to brave him as this woman was doing.

"I am going to have you out of there if it costs all of us our lives!" he cried. "And I give you fair warning that if you kill any of my men your fate will be one to make even strong men shudder. So be wise and surrender! I promise you good treatment, and you will simply be held for a ransom."

"I do not trust you and will defend myself to the last!" the courageous lady replied.

"Very well, if you should be badly wounded or killed in the struggle, you will have no one to blame for it but yourself," Bernal retorted.

"Ready, men; you fellows with the fire-arms keep your eyes on the opening in the door, and if she appears there fire at her—and fire to kill, too. The moment the door is broken in, drop the wagon-tongue, draw your pistols, and all make a rush together! Don't hurt the woman if you can help it, and if any man is hurt by her I will take such a vengeance that this district will shudder over the tale for years!"

The ferocious words did not cause the dauntless woman to lose courage.

Despite the fair words of the bandit, she felt that she would as soon die as fall into his hands,

for she had often heard of the evil deeds of the Mexican outlaw.

Talbot's wife was a tall, handsome woman, with jet-black hair and eyes, her features regular and finely-cut, and her figure finely-proportioned—a woman who would attract attention anywhere.

The readers of the romance which told of Dick Talbot's adventures in No Man's Land will remember her, for therein she figured under the name of 'Frisco Nell.'

She had lived for years on the frontiers, and so was no stranger to the exciting scenes which occur on the borders of civilization; and thus it happened that she was able to handle fire-arms about as well as a man, and during her husband's absence she slept fully dressed, ready for any alarm or exigency.

"Steady, now, men," commanded Bernal. "Two or three good raps and the door will go in. Now, then, hammer away!"

Bang! went the heavy wagon-tongue against the door; it was a stout one, but had never been calculated to resist such rude treatment as this.

It had been Mrs. Talbot's idea to fire from the barred wicket at the men when they attempted to break in the door, but Bernal's order to fire at her if she appeared at the window prevented her from carrying out this plan.

The door trembled under the first blow, yielded a little at the second, and the third burst it from its hinges and sent it tumbling into the room.

Then the brigands dropped the wagon-tongue and rushed, pell-mell, into the apartment, fumbling for their revolvers as they ran.

Mrs. Talbot, as pale as a ghost, and with her great, black eyes blazing lurid fires, stood with a pistol in each hand, and, as the outlaws rushed into the room, she fired two shots, but in the excitement of the moment she did not take careful aim and the bullets whistled clear over the heads of the intruders.

Before she could raise the hammers so as to fire again the outlaws surrounded her.

The pistols were torn from her grasp, and, with no gentle hands, the ruffians seized and hurried her out into the court-yard where the bandit chief received her with a grim smile.

"Now what was the use of putting us to all this trouble?" he cried. "Why was it not as well for you to surrender in the first place? Were it not for the fact that it is my intention to take you with me, and hold you for a heavy ransom, I would make you pay dearly for your folly."

"My husband will take a bitter revenge for this outrage," the lady replied, her spirit undaunted, although she was a helpless prisoner in the outlaws' hands.

"Your husband will pay about twenty thousand dollars for your ransom!" Bernal declared with a triumphant smile. "And if he does not he will never see you again!"

"This deed will cost you your life!" Mrs. Talbot retorted.

"Bah! I have been threatened in that way a hundred times and yet I still live! Threatened men live long—it is an old saying, and a true one. But, now to business. You understand, of course, that I did not pay this visit for the purpose of letting you see what kind of men the Hawks of Cababi are. I am going to relieve you of your valuables. There are lots of bad men in this country, so I will take charge of your wealth, then no one will be able to steal it."

This pleasantry caused a grin to appear on the faces of the outlaws.

"If you will have the kindness to tell us where your valuables are kept it will save us the trouble of hunting for them."

"You will not receive any information from me," was the defiant reply.

Bernal scowled and regarded Mrs. Talbot intently for a moment, but the lady never quailed, looking him straight in the eye.

"Well, I must say that you are about as obstinate a woman as I have met in some time!" he declared. "Now, let me reason with you a little."

"Reason all you like; I am sure that you will not be able to change my determination," she responded.

"What good will it do you to be ugly and so put us to needless trouble?" the outlaw chief demanded. "I know that your husband is in the habit of keeping large sums of money in the house, and that cash I want. Report says you possess some elegant jewels, diamonds fit for a princess to wear. The diamond is my favorite stone; I am an excellent judge of diamonds, and I should like to examine yours and see if they are really as handsome as they are said to be."

"I am helpless in your hands and the ranch is at your mercy, but, most certainly, I will not give you any information which will aid you in your thievish work!" Mrs. Talbot persisted, undauntedly.

"Well, well—by great odds you are the most obstinate madame I ever encountered!" the outlaw chief declared, angrily. "And if I did not intend to hold you for a heavy ransom, and so am prohibited from injuring you, I would soon

find a way to make you talk," and he shook his clinched fist in her face. "As it is, we will find the plunder without you."

By this time Red Dias had secured his prisoners and appeared with them in the court-yard. The herdsman was also bound like the others, so that it would not be suspected he was a spy.

"Possibly some of these fellows may know something of the place where the wealth is kept," Red Dias suggested, pointing to his prisoners.

"It is not likely," Bernal inferred. "If I thought it was, the torture soon should force them to tell what they know."

"It is useless to waste your time with these men, or to subject them to any ill-treatment," Mrs. Talbot interposed. "They know nothing of the matter. And you are wrong in your supposition that my husband keeps much money in the house, for it is not true. I doubt if there is over a hundred dollars in the ranch; the only valuable articles are my diamonds, and, as there is only a pair of ear-rings and a breast pin, they will not make you rich."

"Ah, I reckon you are merely trying to throw me off the scent now," the outlaw exclaimed.

"Search as much as you please!" the lady rejoined. "You will find that I have spoken the truth."

"Dias, you and Apache Mike come with me," Bernal commanded, "and if we do not succeed in making a raise I shall be disappointed."

Then, looking through the door he saw that there were a couple of trunks in the room.

"Those trunks in all probability contain what we want," the outlaw decided. "And if you will favor us with the keys it will save us the trouble of breaking them open, which will be apt to damage them materially."

An angry light flashed from Mrs. Talbot's eyes and she seemed to be on the point of making an angry retort; but a second thought told her that it would be useless to refuse, so she delivered the keys.

The three outlaws entered the apartment, and while the brigand chief proceeded to open and examine the trunks he directed Red Dias and Apache Mike to search the room and the adjoining apartment for secret hiding-places.

"It is possible that the woman spoke the truth about the money," he remarked. "A prudent man would not be apt to keep much money in the house, particularly in a locality where a visit from gentlemen like ourselves might be expected at any time, but a search will do no harm."

As the outlaw had expected, it was not fruitful of big results. In the trunks Bernal found the diamonds, and, in a buckskin bag, about a hundred dollars in coin and bills.

"We will make our money out of the ransom that we will get for this woman, and if we only get ten thousand for her, it will not be a bad night's work," the chief declared.

Ten minutes later, the Hawks, with Bernal at the head, and Mrs. Talbot, a prisoner, in their midst, were in retreat over the prairie toward their secret haunt in the wild, picturesque glade.

The herdsmen were left, bound and helpless, in the court-yard of the ranch.

CHAPTER IX. ON THE TRAIL.

As we have stated, the marauders left all of the men whom they captured bound in the ranch court-yard, their spy included, to divest suspicion from him.

Two of the captives were peons, who possessed no more heart than a hare, but the third was an American cowboy, Tom Martin by name, a daring and resolute fellow.

He was awakened from sleep to find a dozen brigands threatening him with leveled revolvers; so had made a virtue of necessity, and surrendered as meekly as the others. During all the scene he had remained quiet; but no sooner were the marauders gone than the resolute fellow began the struggle for freedom.

He endeavored to burst the lariat with which his arms were secured, but the tough leather was too much for his strength.

The still bound spy affected to be much alarmed at his attempts and begged him to desist, saying that, if the outlaws should return and discover what he had been trying to do, they would be so incensed they would be likely to murder all of them.

"Shut up, you blasted coward!" cried the cowboy, roughly. "If I can get this infernal lariat off, so I can shut that gate, I would go bail to hold the ranch against a small army of these skunk-hearted Greasers!"

Finding that the lariat was not to be broken, Martin persuaded one of the peons to put his hand in his pocket and get out his jack-knife.

With his teeth he managed to open the blade. Then, placing the knife in the hand of the peon and sawing against it, he soon contrived to cut the rope.

Soeasily he freed his companions, then closed the gate and made it secure.

"We shall all be murdered if the band returns," the spy declared, "for we have no firearms with which to defend ourselves."

"Oh, haven't we?" the cowboy replied. "The

thieves didn't get my tools, you bet! My barkers happened to be under my blanket, and, in their hurry, the coyotes did not think of looking there."

Daylight came at last, and, about six in the morning, a party of the cowboy patrol came in. Great was their astonishment when they learned the particulars of the outrage.

There were three Americans in the party, and they at once determined to pursue the Mexicans, but Tom Martin demurred.

"By this time the scoundrels have gained some secure retreat in the mountains," he observed, "and what could four men do even if we were able to track them? Talbot himself will be here about noon, and the Indian, too, is to come in. We'll all have our fill of fight then. If any can follow the trail, the red-skin is the human hound to do it."

So no movement was made, and about half-past eleven Talbot and the Indian, Mud Turtle, made their appearance, having met on the road.

Of course the amazement and anger of Talbot when he learned what had taken place were at a white heat, and although the Indian said nothing after his fashion, yet his eyes flashed angry fires and stern was the look upon his massive face.

"Carried off for a ransom by this scoundrel?" Talbot repeated.

"Yes, and he said it would cost twenty thousand dollars to redeem her," Tom Martin answered.

"The thief has pitched upon a high figure; he must take me for a millionaire," Talbot remarked; "and think me a first-class fool besides."

"I have often heard of his playing that game on the Mexican side of the line, but I never knew him to try it on in Arizona," said one of the cowboys.

"He will not get any twenty thousand dollars out of me!" Talbot announced. "The best I can do for him will be to present him with an ounce of lead, which will make the twenty thousand dollars quite superfluous."

"We are with you, Mr. Talbot," Martin declared. "These Greaser coyotes may be fighters on their own soil, but they don't scare us cowboys for a cent. For one, I just pine for the muss."

The Americans all protested that nothing would please them better than a chance at the Hawks of Cababi, but the Mexicans and peons shook their heads; the deeds of the red-handed Bernal and his blood-thirsty followers had inspired them with an overpowering fear, and they were not disposed to go out of their way to encounter the dreaded bandit.

One of the Mexicans, who had just returned from a visit across the line, remarked that it was probable the outlaws had been driven over the border by the Mexican troops who had concentrated in the town of Alter in force.

"Boys, I am much obliged to you for your offer," Talbot replied to these volunteers, "but at present I will not be able to avail myself of your help, for until the brigands are tracked to their lair it will be of no use for an expedition to proceed against them. You can rest assured that I shall lose no time in getting upon their trail. But how was it that the thieves were able to get into the ranch without creating an alarm?"

This was a question none could answer.

All explained how they had been awakened from sleep to find themselves in the hands of the marauders, but how the outlaws had managed to get through the bolted gate no one could say.

Talbot, though, was not slow in coming to a solution of the problem.

"I would not willingly wrong any man, even by an unjust suspicion," he said, "but it seems plain to me that, either through accident or design, the gate was left unfastened."

This charge affected the three peons only, for Tom Martin had nothing to do with the gate.

Each one of the three protested earnestly that it was not he who had left the barrier open or unbarred, and called upon all the saints in the calendar to witness that he spoke naught but the truth.

"I shall discover the truth some day," Talbot declared, sternly. "If it was accidental, I shall take no action, but if one of you is in the pay of Bernal, I will certainly have that man's life in atonement!"

The peons all reiterated their innocence, the spy loudest of all; but he was terribly uneasy under Talbot's searching glance, and in his heart devoutly wished he was well out of the scrape.

At once arranging so that it would be impossible to surprise the ranch in the future, Talbot and Mud Turtle mounted their horses and rode out of the court.

They had started upon the trail!

"As these fellows had no fear of pursuit, it is not likely they have taken any trouble to hide their trail," Talbot remarked, as he and the Indian rode slowly along, the keen eyes of Mud Turtle fixed intently upon the ground.

"Too many hosses near ranch—too many cowboys—no make out Greaser trail," the savage answered.

On they went until they were about a thousand yards from the ranch, and then, without a word, the Indian suddenly leaped to the ground.

It was on the spot where the brigands' horses had been tethered.

The acute chief speedily comprehended the signs, and explained that the outlaws had there left their steeds while they had made the raid.

As Talbot had anticipated, in his retreat Bernal had taken no pains to conceal his trail, so it was easy to follow it.

Straight southward went the broad trail until it struck the north fork of the Rio Alter.

"We are over the line now, and are on Mexican soil," Talbot observed, as they came in sight of the river. "Isn't it singular, chief, that these fellows haven't taken any trouble to cover their trail?"

"Mebbe Mexican mean fight," the chief suggested.

"I reckon that is the reason. They are in force and think they can defy any attack. The chances, too, are that they have a little ambuscade fixed up in these hills, and if we are not careful we will run into it."

"Yes, Mexicans play games that way," the chief admitted.

"Suppose we dismount, hide our steeds and trail on foot? What say, chief?"

"It is good!" assented the Blackfoot.

They dismounted, hid their steeds in a dense thicket, and then, their hands on their revolvers, they started on again—the red-skin in the advance.

A peculiar figure the Blackfoot presented. His stalwart form was arrayed in the prairie garb of buckskin, the suit much the worse for wear, and his head crowned with a high silk hat, from under which came his long black locks floating down around his shoulders.

Rapidly now, Mud Turtle proceeded, Dick Talbot close behind, both taking advantage of every bush and boulder to screen them as they advanced.

The country grew more and more rugged, until, at last, the trail passed over a bed of rocks and ended at the water that here rippled over a bed of sand which shone like gold.

"They have taken to the water so as to baffle further pursuit from this point," Talbot remarked.

"Bah, Mexican no fool Mud Turtle! You go one side—I go odder," the Indian now commanded, as if his finer instincts were now to be brought into play.

"Good idea! When they leave the stream, we will not fail to strike the trail again."

"Mexicans fool Mexican; no fool Blackfoot, nor white chief," was the confident rejoinder.

CHAPTER X.

THE OUTLAWS' LAIR.

ON they went again, but about a hundred yards further they made a discovery.

The watercourse there divided. A huge rock rearing itself in mid-stream split the current in two.

"Well, what do you think of this?" Talbot asked.

"Mebbe island. Rivers come togedder, bimeby, pretty soon."

"Possibly that is so," Talbot replied. "We can soon find out. You go ahead on your side as I will on mine—say for a few hundred yards, and then, if it isn't an island, and neither one of us makes a discovery, we will return to this point, and decide which branch to follow."

With a nod the chief went on his way, while Talbot pursued his.

We will follow Talbot's footsteps.

As he advanced, the watercourse increased in size from brooks which flowed into it from the north, and as the stream now ran from east to west, with a trend to the south, Talbot quickly concluded that he was following the main river. This assurance made it necessary to rejoin Mud Turtle, so he retraced his steps to the big rock, and there met the Blackfoot.

"What luck?" Talbot asked.

"No trail—river sink!"

"Ah, I see."

Talbot understood. In some parts of that country, good-sized streams wholly disappear in the sands, at spots called "sinks." This was such a case.

"We will keep on down this stream then," Talbot decided. "I have an idea that the outlaws have not taken to the river to hide their trail, but because it is better traveling, for it is a rough road for horses over these rocks."

The red-skin assented by a nod.

Again the two proceeded, now with utmost caution, for they might come upon the outlaws at any moment.

A little way the stream flowed peacefully along over the sands, then, the character of the country changing, the bed of the river became filled with rocks.

"These rocks will force the horsemen to take to the land again," Talbot decided.

"Soon find trail—mebbe," the chief observed, hopefully.

Despite their skill, neither of the two discovered the spot where the riders left the water,

because they had taken advantage of a ledge upon which horses' hoofs left no mark.

But the trail hunters had no difficulty in striking the tracks again, a little further on, and then stuck to the path until the narrow mountain defile widened into a valley, almost bare of trees and bushes.

Over this open space they proceeded with increased caution, for they now decided that they were nearing the outlaws' retreat.

Their inference was correct, for half-way down the valley a sentinel was posted, and a hundred yards or so back of him was an outpost, consisting of half a dozen brigands, who were reclining on the sward, some playing cards, while others were conversing.

Taking advantage of the "cover" afforded by the rocks and bushes, the trailers had advanced to the edge of the valley where they had a good view of the band, without the Mexicans being aware of their enemy's presence.

"Whoever selected this position had the eye of a soldier," Talbot remarked, in a low tone, to the red-skin.

"Yes, good for fight," the chief replied.

"Capital place for camp and stronghold. At the other end the valley contracts again, so there must be another rocky defile to pass," Talbot observed. "In case of attack from this side, these fellows would retreat into that defile, where they would find plenty of shelter behind the rocks and bushes, while the attackers would be forced to advance across this open plain, exposed to the fire of the protected men. A dozen resolute fellows would hold such a pass against a hundred."

"Ugh, make big fight there!"

"And these hills are so steep on both sides that it would not be possible to scale them and so turn the position."

"Big-horned sheep go up—no man," and the red-skin glanced studiously at the steep hill-side.

"Well, Mud Turtle, it seems to me we have come to the end of our rope," Talbot observed, with lowering brow.

"Yes, no go," the Indian returned, with a shake of his head.

"We evidently can do nothing more at present. We have tracked the thieves to their camp, but we cannot profit much by our discovery. It is of course useless for us two to attack them."

"Get killed! No good get killed yet," suggested Mud Turtle.

"That is about the size of it. If we could creep in under cover till we got in range, we might pick off three or four of the rascals, and give them a lively shaking up, but under the circumstances that is not possible."

"No good do that now!" demurred the chief.

"We might go back, make a detour, and approach the defile from below, coming up the river, but the chances are that we would find the approach from that direction equally difficult."

"Yes, all alike, mebbe."

"It is a difficult problem to decide just what to do," Talbot remarked, thoughtfully.

He was silent for four or five minutes pondering over the matter, but after that his face lighted up, and the Indian, who was watching him intently, guessed he had hit upon a plan.

"Alone you and I cannot hope to cope with all these ruffians," Talbot then explained. "If we tried to raise a force of cowboys we probably could not get together over a dozen good men, and, although I should not hesitate to meet these thieves in a fair fight, even if they outnumbered us three to one, yet it would be madness to attempt to storm such a strong position as this."

Mud Turtle nodded assent to this view of the situation.

"But an idea has come to me. If you remember, one of the Mexican herdsmen said that the town of Alter was occupied by Mexican troops who had been detailed for the express purpose of hunting down Bernal and his murderous band."

"Get Mexicans to help, hey?" exclaimed the Blackfoot.

"That is it. Having discovered this secret retreat, I will go to the Mexican commander at Alter and reveal to him what I know. Then I will suggest that, while he comes up the river and endeavors to force his way to the stronghold, I, with my cowboys, will come down the stream and take the enemy in the rear."

"It is good!" the Indian exclaimed, promptly.

"I think the scheme will work. If the Mexican troops are worth their salt as fighting-men and will make a vigorous dash so as to keep the outlaws busy, we, with the cowboys, might manage to make things pretty lively for them."

"Big thing!" ejaculated the chief, evidently relishing the idea of a real field fight.

"We must get out of here lively now and make for Alter as fast as possible."

"You bet!" assented Mud Turtle, who was well up in all the slang of the border.

Cautiously then the pair withdrew from their dangerous position and retraced their steps.

They covered the ground to the spot where they had secreted their horses in half the time it had taken them in the advance, and, again in the saddle, they pushed forward as fast as the rough way would allow, bending to the eastward until they came to the open prairie beyond the head-waters of the north fork of the Alter. Once there, they turned to the south and rode straight for the Mexican town.

It was a long ride, and it was late in the afternoon when the two reached their destination.

The town looked like a military post, being gay with uniforms.

Talbot inquired of the first soldier he met in regard to the commander of the detachment, and was informed that the troops were the Tenth regiment of the line, mounted infantry, Colonel Don Jose de Janos in command, and that the colonel together with his Excellency, Don Phillip Torres, Governor of Sonora, could be found at the hotel.

"The governor of the province here, eh?" Talbot observed to his red companion. "That looks as if these Mexicans mean business."

The Indian shook his head.

"Mexican talk much—run better than fight," the chief observed, sagely.

"It is evident, chief, you have not a very good opinion of these Dons."

"Dons—bah—dam!" responded Mud Turtle, and with a smile on his face at Mud Turtle's supreme disgust Talbot rode up to the hotel.

Leaving his horse in charge of Mud Turtle, Talbot at once entered the hostelry.

"I suppose I had better see the governor, as he undoubtedly ranks the colonel," the rancher concluded, as he made his way through the crowd that thronged the saloon—ten soldiers to one civilian.

The American found that it was no easy matter to gain speech with either the governor or the colonel, for they were hedged around with a vast deal of ceremony, but by sending an urgent message that he came with important news in regard to the brigand, Bernal, Talbot was admitted to the presence of the great men.

The governor was a portly gentleman, well along in years, a man evidently of little ability, but what he lacked in brains he made up in dignity.

The colonel was a young fellow of twenty-five, quite a dandy, and with an air which plainly revealed the fact that he had an extremely good opinion of himself.

There were a couple of other officers in the room and a plainly-dressed Mexican, who looked like a rancher.

"Well, my man, you say you have information to impart regarding this scoundrel of a Bernal?" the governor remarked, in a patronizing way, that galled Talbot immediately.

"I have. The bandit made a raid on my ranch last night, just across the line in Arizona and abducted my wife."

"Some husbands would thank the brigand for such a service," the colonel remarked, with a laugh.

CHAPTER XI.

A SLIGHT MISUNDERSTANDING.

THE officers laughed as in duty bound, the Mexican rancher "snickered," and even the portly, dignified governor permitted a smile to appear on his fat face.

"In my opinion this is not a subject for jesting, nor will I permit it in my presence!" Talbot exclaimed, sternly.

The tone was such that a hush immediately fell upon the group; the colonel moved uneasily in his chair for a moment and then blurted out:

"I do not choose to be called to an account for any light remark that I may chance to make!"

"Then make your remarks so that they will not give offense!" Talbot replied, immediately. "I am not in the habit of allowing men to jest with me."

"Sir, your tone is offensive and one that I cannot allow to pass unnoticed!" cried the colonel in a rage, springing to his feet. "Do you know who I am?"

"To judge by your language you are an ass!" Talbot exclaimed.

"You dog of an American! Do you dare to insult me, a Mexican officer?" cried the colonel, white with rage.

"And how dare you utter a word reflecting upon my wife?" exclaimed Talbot.

By this time the governor had recovered from the amazement into which he had been thrown by this sudden quarrel, and took it upon himself to interfere.

"Come, come, gentlemen, really this matter must go no further. You forget that you are in the presence of the Governor of Sonora!" the old gentleman exclaimed, pompously.

By this time the Mexican colonel had in a measure recovered from the fit of rage into which he had been thrown by the biting words of the American.

"My dear governor, I trust you will pardon my hastiness," the colonel said with a polite bow. "I was betrayed into an error by the insolence of this fellow," and he cast a con-

temptuous glance at Talbot. "I should have remembered."

"And as for you, sir," and he shook his finger, menacingly, at the American, "I will take occasion at some convenient opportunity to call you to an account for your words."

"You will find me, sir, always ready to back my words with deeds, take me where you will," Talbot replied.

"Come, come, gentlemen, do not have any trouble on account of an idle word," the governor remarked, soothingly.

The bold stand that Talbot made had produced an impression upon him.

"This gentleman, Señor American," continued the governor, waving his hand toward the soldier, "is Don Jose de Janos, colonel of the Tenth Regiment of the line, mounted infantry, and is now in command of this district, specially detailed to hunt down and either capture or kill this notorious Fernando Bernal. And if you bring information of the bandit, he is the man to use it."

"I most certainly do bring you news of the brigand, for I have just come from his stronghold in the mountains," Talbot replied.

All within the room stared at this intelligence, and none seemed more astonished than the Mexican rancher, upon whose face there was an extremely peculiar look.

Talbot, who by reason of his vast experience was wondrous quick and remarkably skillful at reading men's faces, noticed the expression at once, and it immediately set him to work conjecturing what caused it.

"It really looks as if the intelligence was extremely unwelcome to the man," was the thought that came into his mind. "But what difference can it make to him?"

"This is indeed important information," the governor declared.

"Yes, if it can be replied upon," the colonel remarked with an air which plainly said he put but little faith in it.

"How may I call your name, señor?" Don Phillip Torres asked.

"Talbot—Richard Talbot."

"I believe I understood you to say that you resided in Arizona."

"Yes, my ranch is near the town of Arivaca."

"Ah, yes, I know the location. And this Bernal made a raid on your ranch last night?"

"Yes, I was absent on a trip to Silveropolis, and about all my men were away, or else the brigand would not have plundered the place without a fight," Talbot observed. "As it is, I am satisfied that some one of my herdsmen was bribed by the bandit to open the gate of my ranch so he could get in."

"Very likely—extremely likely!" the governor exclaimed. "I have been informed that it is this ladrone's game to get all the poor people on his side, and so he never troubles the small ranches; in fact, he makes them presents, if they are in need, and the result of this is that it is hard work to find any one who is willing to tell anything about the man."

"As soon as I returned home and discovered that my ranch had been plundered and my wife taken away to be held for a ransom, I took up the trail and with a trusty friend followed immediately on the track of the outlaws."

"Aha, this is growing interesting!" exclaimed the old gentleman, rubbing his hands. "You have had experience, I presume, in prairie craft and so were able to track the scoundrels?"

"Yes, and my companion, who is an Indian chief, is one of the best trailers that ever followed a track."

"A lucky circumstance," cried the governor. "And you succeeded in your task—you tracked these brigands to their lair?"

"Yes, to their retreat in the mountains, which is on the head-waters of the North Fork of the Rio Alter," Talbot replied.

"Ah, yes, yes, that agrees with the account that this worthy man has given us," and the governor nodded to the Mexican rancher.

"Señor Talbot, are you acquainted with this gentleman," the official continued, indicating the Mexican.

"I have not that pleasure," Talbot answered.

"Señor John Gallego," the governor remarked.

The Mexican bowed and Talbot returned the salutation.

"The worthy gentleman has a ranch some thirty miles from this town, on the Rio Alter, and his land runs to the junction of the North Fork with the main stream. He has been greatly troubled by this brigand, who has made free with his beeves and his sheep, just as if he owned the animals, and so, in self-defense, Señor Gallego set spies on the outlaws, and has succeeded in discovering where the scoundrels have their haunt, and, as you say, it is on the North Fork of the Alter, in a wild and broken country, remote from all settlements."

"That is true; it is as wild a region as can be found in all Sonora," Talbot observed.

"Colonel de Janos intends to move with all his force against the brigands soon," the governor announced. "And there is no doubt that

he will make short work of the fellows if he can only succeed in catching them. All I fear is that when the troops advance the ladrones will disperse, but even then the colonel will keep up the chase and make the country so hot for them that they will be glad to seek other quarters."

Talbot shook his head.

"I regret that I am not able to agree with you, governor, in regard to this," he said.

"Not agree! I do not understand your meaning; pray explain!" cried the official, profoundly astonished that any one should have the presumption to say such a thing.

"I rather think that the troops will be able to find these outlaws, and I should not be at all surprised if they showed fight," Talbot remarked.

"So much the better!" the colonel cried. "That is exactly what I want. If the scoundrels will only stand so I will have a chance at them, I ask for nothing better, for then I will be able to bag the entire gang!"

"Oh, yes; if they will only show fight so that the colonel can get at them he will be able to exterminate the band," the governor remarked.

"But they will not!" the rancher exclaimed. "The scoundrels will never dare to fight unless they are so completely surprised that they will not be able to seek safety in flight; then they may, in their desperation, attempt to resist like the wolf at bay."

"You see, Señor Talbot, it is our idea to make a forced march and surprise these scoundrels," the governor explained. "It is our calculation to take them unawares and surround them with an overwhelming force before they know that we are in the neighborhood."

"Señor Governor, it will not be possible to execute any such plan," Talbot declared.

This announcement made the official and the military men stare, while the Mexican rancher appeared to be decidedly uneasy.

"Señor Talbot, you have made a very decided declaration!" the governor exclaimed.

"As you are not a military man, possibly your judgment in regard to the matter cannot be relied upon," the colonel observed, with a sneer.

"I will state the facts upon which I base that judgment, and then you can draw your own conclusions," Talbot replied.

"If you will be so kind," said the governor, quite politely, but with an air which plainly announced that he considered the matter of little importance.

"The North Fork of the Alter rises in a broken and irregular country, and, some five miles from its head, flows through a series of canyon-like defiles between which, here and there, are small, open valleys. These defiles are only a hundred yards or so wide, and the sides are so steep, covered too with scrub-pines, that only a goat or a big-horned sheep could hope to scale them. All through these passes, too, are scattered clumps of trees and bushes and masses of rocks, so that most excellent cover for sharpshooters is afforded.

"In one of these valleys the brigands have their headquarters. I scouted in from the north and found my way barred by a sentinel, and beyond him a picket in regular military style, and there is no doubt that the approach from the south is equally well guarded, so that it is an impossibility to surprise the outlaws. And when the pickets are driven in they will fall back into one of these defiles, where, thanks to the natural advantages of the position, a dozen men could give successful battle to a hundred."

There was a moment's silence; the governor looked at the colonel, as much as to ask him what he thought of the statement, and was answered by an incredulous smile.

"Do you say, Señor Talbot, that you saw this sentinel and picket-guard with your own eyes?" the governor asked.

"Yes, sir; I approached near enough to see how strong the position was, and then retreated, satisfied that it would take a small army to whip the brigands in such a strong position."

"Bah!" cried the colonel, "what can these twelve or fifteen men do against my whole regiment, even supposing that they occupied the strongest position in the world?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE LITTLE MISUNDERSTANDING IS SETTLED.

The officers smiled and nodded to each other as much as to say that this declaration settled the matter, while the governor put on a look of profound wisdom and said to Talbot:

"Señor Talbot, you see, these fellows will not stand any chance against such overwhelming odds."

"From where do you get your information that there are only twelve or fifteen in the band?" Talbot asked.

"It is the common report, and then, your spies said that that was the number of men that Bernal had with him," the governor observed, addressing the rancher.

"Yes, your Excellency, that is what they said," the man replied. "Of course, of my own

knowledge, I know nothing about the matter, but these fellows of mine I have always found to be truthful, honest men, and I do not think they would knowingly deceive me."

"And did they say anything about the brigands having sentinels and picket guards?" the official asked.

"Not a word, your Excellency. It may be possible, you know, that their stronghold is not guarded on the south side."

"True, very true!" exclaimed the governor with an air of great wisdom, and all the military men nodded assent.

By this time Talbot had come to a conclusion in regard to the rancher.

"The fellow is a rascal," he murmured to himself. "It is ten to one that he is in the pay of the brigands and is scheming to lead the soldiers into a trap."

"These are trustworthy men, you see, Señor Talbot, and from the fact that they did not discover any sentinels it seems to indicate that the ladrones have neglected to post them on the south side," the official said.

"It is more probable that they did not go near enough to the bandit's stronghold, to find out whether there are sentinels posted or not," Talbot rejoined. "And then, in regard to the number of men under Bernal's command, instead of twelve or fifteen, he has over thirty."

This announcement created great surprise, and it was plain from the look on the faces of the Mexicans that they did not credit it.

"You may be incredulous, gentlemen, but it is the truth!" Talbot asserted. "One of my American cowboys was captured by the rascals last night when they attacked my ranch, and he is a careful fellow, one who is not apt to lose his head, and his statement is that there were over thirty men in the party, and all well armed."

"Fifteen or thirty it makes no difference!" the colonel asserted. "It is a mere handful, anyway, and my fellows will soon make mince-meat out of the scoundrels if they will only give me an opportunity to get a fair crack at them."

"Yes, and taking them by surprise, too—they will be overwhelmed before they know what has befallen them!" the governor exclaimed, with a chuckle.

Talbot was disgusted; he saw that the troops were being led into a trap and comprehended that little importance would be placed upon anything he could say, still he felt that he must speak.

"I hope your Excellency will pardon me if I utter a few words in remonstrance," he said. "This idea that Bernal can be surprised is altogether out of the question. He is said to have his spies in every village, and the moment your troops set out the news will be immediately conveyed to him. So, instead of surprising him you will find the brigands on the alert ready to receive you, and I can assure you that, thanks to the nature of the ground which he has selected and upon which you will be compelled to fight, he will have you at a terrible disadvantage. History records the defeat on a dozen different occasions of veteran soldiers by a mere handful of men who had the advantage of a strong position."

"Yes; but these miserable brigands will not be able to whip my men," the colonel declared, loftily.

"I was going to suggest that I could raise a force of cowboys, all good men, and used to bushwhacking, who could meet the outlaws at their own game and would be sure to give a good account of themselves," Talbot remarked.

"It is not necessary, sir," the colonel replied, immediately. "I am capable of handling these bandits without calling upon any of you Americans for assistance. After I have driven the vermin out of Sonora and over the American line you can attend to them."

"Yes, it would be contrary to our policy to accept the services of these cowboys," the governor added. "And you need not be concerned about the matter. By this time to-morrow these outlaws will be exterminated."

"Well, I hope so, but I do not believe it, all the same," Talbot rejoined, rather sharply. "If you catch a Tartar and these outlaws beat you back, I hope you will remember that you were warned, but neglected to profit by it."

Then Talbot withdrew, feeling decidedly out of sorts.

He understood that it would be a mere waste of breath to endeavor to make the Mexicans see that they were being led into a trap.

Talbot was in a quandary. What should he do? Return to his ranch, summon the cowboys, and attempt to engage the brigands on the north while the Mexicans fought their way up from the south, as had been his original idea?

But upon reflection he concluded this plan would not work.

From what had been said he had got the idea that the troops intended to move very soon, possibly that very night.

The governor had spoken of a forced march so as to surprise the brigands, and therefore it was more than probable that the plan was for the troops to commence their march late at night, after all the town-people had retired to rest;

this would bring them on the ground early in the morning, just after daybreak.

The calculation was that by selecting such an hour for the advance the people of Alter, being in bed, would know nothing of it, and if the brigands had spies in the village, as was reported and commonly believed, their vigilance would be evaded.

"The scheme is not a bad one," Talbot soliloquized, "and if it could be carried out, the brigands might be taken unawares, but as I feel sure that that Mexican rancher is in league with the outlaws, it will be safe to say that the brigands will have ample warning of the starting of the expedition."

"If they start to-night and give battle the first thing in the morning, it will not be possible for me to get my men together and make an attack on them from the north at the same time that the Mexicans go for them, coming up the river."

"What is to be done? Nothing, as far as I can see. The troops are in for a thrashing, and the chances are that they will get so good a one that some of the conceit will be taken out of this braggart colonel, and the old donkey of a governor, who does not care for the assistance of the Americans. All I can do is to wait. After the troops are beaten the outlaw may relax in his watchfulness, thinking that the danger is passed, and then will come my chance to strike him with my cowboys."

"My poor Nell will worry, of course, although she has a stout heart and will be apt to make the best of the situation, but there is not much danger that harm will come to her, until Bernal has made up his mind that no ransom will be forthcoming. As long as he thinks he is going to get a few thousand dollars he will be sure to take all possible care of her, for, according to reports, this fellow prides himself upon being a Mexican gentleman of the bluest blood, although he is the captain of a band of cut-throats, and is particularly attentive to the fair sex."

By this time Talbot had passed through the saloon and opened the door which led into the street: as he crossed the portal a hand was laid upon his shoulder.

He turned and beheld one of the officers who had been in the room during his interview with the governor.

A dapper-looking young man with an elaborately curled mustache and imperial, rather weak in their growth, but the owner had evidently hoped to make up for this by giving them an extra fierce twist.

"Can I speak a few words with you, sir?" asked the Mexican.

"Certainly, I am at your service."

"We will converse as we walk along, so as not to attract attention," said the other.

"Very well."

The two passed into the street.

"Permit me to offer you my card," and the gentleman drew out a silver card-case with an elaborate flourish, extracted a handsome bit of pasteboard from it, and then presented it to his companion.

"Juan La Paz, captain, Tenth Regiment of the line," Talbot remarked, reading the inscription upon the card.

"At your service, sir," said the captain with a bow.

And then a whimsical idea took possession of the American.

They had arrived at the spot where the Indian sat on his steed, as stolid as a marble statue, holding the reins of Talbot's spotted stallion.

"Excuse me for a moment," he observed to the officer, then stepped up to the red-skin and asked:

"Have you got a deck of cards about you?"

The red-man grinned; an inveterate gambler, he never traveled without his tools.

Drawing forth a pack of cards he gave them to Talbot.

"Mebbe, chief come in—ante not too big," he remarked, his eyes glistening with delight at the prospect of a little amusement.

"Well, we are going to play a game, I reckon, and you will be in it too, but it is not the kind of one that you are counting on," Talbot replied. Then from the pack he selected the jack of clubs and wrote his name on the back in large characters; this done he presented the card with a ceremonious bow to the young officer.

The captain read it aloud:

"Richard Talbot, Talbot Ranch, Arivaca, Arizona," then he turned it over, somewhat astonished at the appearance of the card, and beheld the jack of clubs.

He flew into a passion immediately.

"Señor American, do you mean to insult me?" he exclaimed.

"Not at all; that jack of clubs represents me. When I have my fortune told the jack of clubs stands for me always, and as it is the only card I have handy you will have to excuse it."

The captain muttered something under his breath which Talbot did not exactly catch, but it sounded a deal like "brute America."

"Did you speak to me?" the rancher inquired.

"I am about to speak; as the representative of my friend, Colonel Don Jose de Janos, I demand satisfaction!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A HOSTILE MEETING

THIS statement did not astonish the rancher in the least, for he had guessed the errand of the officer the moment that worthy accosted him.

"Satisfaction, eh?" he queried.

"Yes, sir, the satisfaction due from one gentleman to another. You have grossly insulted the colonel, and he cannot rest content until he has wiped out that insult in your blood," the Mexican replied, in an extremely pompous way.

"Yes, I see; I presume it is very natural under the circumstances," Talbot replied. "I should not like to be called an ass myself, even if I knew that I was the biggest kind of a one, for in such a case the truth would be extremely unpalatable."

"I suppose that you Americans recognize the code of honor," the captain remarked, a slight touch in his tone as much as to imply that he was afraid it was not so.

"Oh, yes; we Americans, particularly those like myself who dwell on the border, are as ready to come up to the scratch and meet the men to whom we have given offense as any race of people on earth."

"I am glad to hear it!" the officer exclaimed. "You will give my principal then the satisfaction which he desires?"

"If he is not completely satisfied it will not be my fault," Talbot responded, with a quiet smile.

In his memory there rose up the forms of many men who had craved satisfaction of him during his stormy career, and there was not one who had not got what he desired to his heart's content.

"Have you a friend to act as your second?" the captain inquired. "We would like to settle this matter as speedily as possible, for, as you know, the colonel will soon be on the march against the brigands."

"Certainly; the quicker the better, as far as I am concerned," Talbot replied. "And as to a friend, I am obliged to answer both yes and no."

"How is that?"

"My red-skin friend, on the horse yonder, will back me in the fight as well as any man that steps on the earth this day, but when it comes to settling the preliminaries of an affair like this according to the code of honor, I am rather afraid it will be too much for him; it happens too that he is the only acquaintance that I have in Alter."

"I will introduce you to one of the officers of our regiment who, under such circumstances as at present exist, no doubt will be willing to act as your second," the young Mexican hastened to say.

"Oh, no, no; that would be entirely out of the question!" Talbot exclaimed. "Any officer of the regiment would undoubtedly sympathize with its colonel, and it would be repugnant to the principles of the code for me to have as a second a man who might justly be considered much more likely to prove my enemy than my friend."

"True, I will admit that it is not quite regular, but I assure you that the officers of the Tenth Regiment of the line are all men of honor, and you would be perfectly safe in trusting yourself in the hands of any one of them!" the captain declared.

"Oh, I could not think of troubling them," Talbot replied. "And since there must be some irregularity in the matter, owing to the peculiar circumstances, suppose I act as my own second and attend to the making of the arrangements, while my red-skin friend seconds me on the field."

The Mexican reflected upon the matter for a few moments just as if it was an affair of the greatest importance, and then observed:

"Well, I presume it can be arranged in that way. It is not regular, of course, but as you are so situated it will have to do."

"Yes, that is my idea."

"You accept the challenge, then?"

"Oh, yes; I am not the kind of fellow to deny any man satisfaction when he craves it of me."

"I am glad to hear it. My principal's honor has been wounded; if you should choose to tender an ample and humble apology—"

"Entirely out of the question; no apology will be made," the American replied, firmly.

"In that case then we will come at once to the time, place and weapons."

"As the challenged party it is my right to settle those matters."

"Ye-yes, it is your right according to the code, certainly," observed the Mexican officer, slowly.

The statement had rather taken him by surprise, for he had not expected that a "brute American" would be so well posted in regard to such a matter.

"Most assuredly, and I do not intend to yield any of the advantages of my position."

"Of course, I wish to go strictly according to rule," the captain protested. "I would like to suggest, though, that the affair be brought off as soon as possible, on account of the colonel being engaged in this expedition."

"Certainly, I am agreeable: the quicker the better!" Talbot replied.

"What weapons?"

"Revolvers; have to restrict you to that weapon, as it is the only one I have with me, with the exception of a bowie-knife, and I presume your principal would not care to engage in a duel with knives."

"Certainly not!" the captain exclaimed. "Knives are fit weapons only for savages, not for gentlemen."

The Mexican had been horribly afraid that the "brute American," as he had termed the rancher, would insist upon fighting with some outlandish weapon.

"Revolvers will be perfectly satisfactory," he added, in a gracious manner, and the distance also.

"And in regard to the place, I will ride out of town for about a mile on the Arivaca road and there wait for your party, and when you come up the affair can be settled at once."

"That is satisfactory."

"It is understood, of course, that I am without friends in Alter and will be accompanied only by my second, that your party will be restricted to yourself and principal—and a surgeon; I forgot him, but he will undoubtedly be necessary."

The Mexican captain did not like this and attempted to remonstrate, but Talbot cut him short:

"Captain, the affair must be arranged in this way, or not at all!" the rancher declared. "I have no idea of encountering your colonel, backed by a dozen or two of his friends! That is not according to the code at all."

Finding that Talbot was resolute the Mexican was forced to agree to these conditions.

"Very well, everything is settled then," he observed. "I will report to my principal and then we will start at once."

"All right; I will be in the saddle in five minutes and on the road."

"You will wait for us a mile out on the Arivaca road?"

"Yes; and as there is but little travel over that trail we are not likely to be interrupted."

The captain made a ceremonious bow and then retraced his way to the hotel, while Talbot proceeded to where Mud Turtle sat on his steed.

The Indian had watched the progress of the interview with a deal of curiosity.

His first idea was that the rancher was making arrangements for a gambling bout, but he speedily saw that this was not so.

"What's up, hey?" the chief asked, as Talbot came up to him.

"A challenge to mortal combat."

"Greaser cannot find brigand to fight—fight you, hey?"

"No, not that exactly. The colonel in command of these troops and I had a few words in the hotel, and he is anxious for satisfaction," the rancher explained as he vaulted into the saddle.

"It is good! When you get through with um, mebbe, he no want to fight anybody else," the red-skin observed.

"Maybe not. I am to wait for him a mile out, so let us be going."

Off the two rode, and on the way Talbot related to the Indian the particulars of his interview with the Mexicans.

The rancher had great faith in the judgment of the Indian, and so he did not inform him of the conclusion to which he had arrived, but waited to hear his opinion.

The red-skin gravely pondered over the matter for a few moments, then shook his head and declared that he believed the Mexicans were being led into a trap and the "honest rancher" was in league with the outlaws.

Then Talbot revealed that that was his opinion.

"The Mexicans are going to be led into an ambush and the chances are big that they will get an awful thrashing!" he declared. "I have heard it repeated that this Bernal has said that the Mexican soldiers were no match for his brigands and that the first chance he got at them he would make them run like a lot of whipped dogs."

"Mebbe so; Greaser no good—talk big like dog bow-yow at bear—bear turn, dog run, ki, yi, ki, yi!"

"Yes, and so under the circumstances I shall try not to disable this gallant Mexican, so as to prevent him from leading this expedition, and if he doesn't succeed in plugging me, and I come out all right from the encounter, you and I, Mud Turtle, will follow in the rear of the troops so as to be able to witness the fight."

"It is good. Mebbe we get crack at the outlaws."

"Possibly, and we will improve the opportunity if it comes."

The pair had been riding onward at a brisk canter during this conversation, and it did not take them long to arrive at the appointed spot.

Then they halted, and Talbot carefully examined his revolvers to see that they were in working order.

"A little bit of carelessness about such a matter might cost a man his life," he observed.

The pards were not kept waiting long, for within fifteen minutes, Colonel De Janos, Captain La Paz, and another gentleman who was introduced as Doctor Garcia, the surgeon of the regiment, rode up.

Talbot dismounted and gave his bridle to the Indian when the Mexicans approached.

On arriving at the ground the colonel and captain alighted, the doctor taking charge of the horses.

"How about the conditions of the fight?" the captain asked.

"Thirty paces, fire at the drop of a hat, and each party at liberty to advance after the signal is given and fire as many shots as they like."

"That will suit me!" the colonel exclaimed, unable to keep quiet. "And I give you fair warning, American, that I intend to kill you!" and the speaker fairly hissed out the words.

"Well, now, I do not desire your death," Talbot replied. "I am going to wing you so as to teach you a lesson, and then let this brigand, Bernal, finish you."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MEXICAN TAKES A LESSON.

TALBOT'S cool answer increased the rage of the Mexican colonel.

"What do you say?" he cried violently. "You are going to spare my life so that this miserable bandit will be able to finish me?"

The dashing commander of the Tenth was so astonished at the declaration that he could not believe he had heard aright.

"That is exactly what I said," Talbot replied. "I do not want to kill you; you have not harmed me in any way. You are arrogant and inclined to be insolent, but that is no reason why you should be killed. If I simply wing you, so as to show that I could wipe you out if I felt disposed, it will teach you to be more civil in the future."

The Mexican officer's astonishment and rage were both increased by this speech.

"If I had not encountered some of you Americans before I should be led to think that you are a madman!" the colonel cried. "But as it is, I comprehend that you are but indulging in the boasting so much favored by men of your race. You talk as if you were certain beforehand of what you can do—"

"I am," interrupted Talbot, in his cool way. "Being a dead shot with the revolver, and having come out ahead from forty or fifty of these little affairs, I can speak by the card."

"I also am a dead shot!" asserted the Mexican, with a deal of heat. "And I tell you, Señor American, that I do not intend to have the least mercy upon you. You have put a gross insult upon me—an officer of the Mexican Army with a stainless record—and that insult can only be wiped out with your blood."

"I give you fair warning; it is my intention to kill you—only one of us must leave this ground alive!"

"Things do not always turn out as we plan to have them in this uncertain world," Talbot rejoined. "But arn't we losing time—hadn't we better proceed to business?"

"Yes, too much talk with mouth," the Indian gravely announced. "Talk less—fight more. Mud Turtle fight too, mebbe, hey?" and he nodded to the captain, at the same time drawing from its sheath in his belt an ugly-looking, twelve-inch bowie-knife.

"What does the red-skin mean?" exclaimed the dapper little captain, looking with evident uneasiness at the brawny figure of the muscular chief and the glittering knife which he handled with the air of an expert.

"According to Indian customs, the seconds fight as well as the principals in an affair of this kind," Talbot explained. "I told you, if you remember, that he was not posted in regard to the civilized code."

"Ah, yes, I see; of course such a thing is entirely out of the question," the captain observed.

It was plain that he was not at all anxious to meet such an opponent as the brawny red chief in single fight.

"Put up your knife, my friend," Talbot said to the Indian. "According to the rules under which this gentleman and myself meet—and he nodded to the colonel, "only the principals can fight."

"Ugh," grunted Mud Turtle, as he returned the long knife to its sheath, evidently disappointed, "four fight—more fun."

"Now, how about the signal?" Talbot inquired.

"Let the doctor give it, as he is a neutral party," the captain suggested.

"Very well; that suits me. Suppose you pace off the distance and we will get to work. I will remain here, you can take this as a starting-point, and your principal can go with you, the doctor taking a position midway."

"There is no objection to that," the captain remarked.

"I will precede you," said the colonel, and then darting a look full of hatred at Talbot, he cried:

"For the last time I warn you that you need not expect any mercy at my hands!"

"Oh, go on, and get ready for the encounter! We are going to fight with pistols, not with our tongues!" Talbot rejoined.

The Mexican was nettled by the retort, but as he could not think of a suitable rejoinder, he contented himself with a scowl and marched off up the trail.

The captain followed, carefully counting the paces, the doctor rode slowly along about a hundred feet away from the road, and when the captain finished his task, placing his man at the mark, the doctor was about midway between the two, the duelists and the surgeon forming an almost perfect triangle, the opponents being the base and the surgeon the point.

Then the captain hastened to take up a position by the doctor, Mud Turtle following his example.

"Now, then, gentlemen, are you ready?" asked the surgeon, when the seconds arrived at his side.

"Ready," answered Talbot.

"Ready," responded the colonel.

And as each spoke they drew their revolvers and raised the hammer.

This was not necessary as far as Talbot was concerned, for his pistols were double-acting ones, self-cockers, but it was not his game to allow this to become known, if it could be avoided.

"Now, gentlemen, I am going to prepare to drop the hat," the doctor continued, "so be on your guard, for you are at liberty to fire the moment it leaves my hand."

The antagonists nodded.

The doctor took his hat from his head and with outstretched arm held it before him.

"Now, attention, gentlemen!" he proclaimed, and then, down went the hat.

Up came the revolvers and the reports rung out so close together that one seemed like the echo of the other.

Talbot, though, was the first to fire.

The reader who has followed the fortunes of bold Injun Dick will remember that with the revolver he was the equal of any man who ever cut a figure on Western soil; he was wonderfully quick—a snap-shot, who could "draw a bead" on his mark without, seemingly, troubling himself to take aim, and on this occasion, by his quickness, he disconcerted his antagonist, for the colonel was one of those marksmen who are accustomed to dwell on their aim, but having a presentiment that Talbot would fire as soon as his revolver reached the level, the Mexican determined to chance a shot, too.

The colonel reasoned that if his first bullet missed, he had six more, for his weapon was a seven-shooter.

But in his calculation he had omitted one important factor.

He had not reckoned that his opponent was a man without a superior as a pistol-shot in the known world.

His shot was a good line one, but too high, for the bullet cut the air fully a foot over the head of the man at whose heart it had been aimed.

Talbot's lead on the contrary went true to the mark at which it was sent.

The bullet struck the Mexican colonel in the fleshy part of the arm, just below the shoulder, and cut its way into the shoulder itself.

The wound was an ugly one, and despite his attempt to disguise the fact that he was wounded, the hurt forced an exclamation from the Mexican.

"The colonel is hit!" exclaimed the doctor, whose practiced eyes at once detected the fact.

The colonel was game though.

"It is nothing!" he cried. "A mere scratch, that is all!"

Then he essayed to raise his hand so as to take another shot, but the pain caused by the movement was so intense that it made him groan in spite of his determination.

The doctor jumped from his horse, casting the reins to the Indian, and hurried toward the wounded man.

The colonel had grown pale in the face; it was only by a great effort that he kept the revolver in his hand.

"Do not fire, Señor American!" cried the surgeon.

"Let him come on!" exclaimed the colonel, grating his teeth together. "I am not satisfied. I am still in the field, and if I cannot use my right hand, my left one is at my service!"

"No, no!" cried the captain, rushing forward. "Such a thing is not to be thought of—it is against all rules!"

"I demand another shot—I am not disabled!" the colonel protested.

"I am quite willing to oblige the gentleman," Talbot observed. "Although the proceeding is not at all regular, as I understand the code. If he wants to have a crack at me with his left hand, well and good; I am agreeable and I will use my left hand also, but it is only fair to give you due warning that I can shoot about as well with the left hand as with the right, for I have practiced fully as much with one hand as I have with the other."

"I cannot permit this affair to go further at present," the doctor declared. "Colonel, you must really excuse me for interfering, but I can

see that you are badly hurt, and if you do not permit me to attend to your wound immediately, I will not be answerable for the consequences."

"Am I to be baffled of my revenge?" the Mexican colonel cried, terribly enraged at the thought. "Think not, you braggart American, that I am daunted by your boastful words! I have no experience in using a revolver in the left hand, but I am not afraid to encounter you in that way!"

"No, no!" cried the doctor and the captain in a breath.

"If that is the truth, it would be simply murder for you to encounter me in that way," Talbot declared. "Let me give you a proof that I am a dead shot with the left hand as well as with the right."

"Mud Turtle, throw your hat up in the air." Off came the dilapidated "plug" that the red-skin sported, the silk "tile" that erst had graced the person of some frontier dandy, who desired to play the swell in true Eastern style, and then, with a vigorous swing of his muscular arm, the Indian tossed the hat high in the air.

Talbot had shifted the revolver to his left hand; he waited until the hat attained its highest point, and then, as it paused there for a fraction of a second before beginning its descent to the earth, he fired three shots, the self-cocking revolver enabling him to do this with astonishing rapidity.

"There!" the rancher cried after the third shot was fired, "if you do not find three bullet-holes in that hat I will engage to eat it, and I am not hungry for aged silk hats to-day, either!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE SECRET EXPEDITION.

THE red-skin had tossed the hat in such a way that it came down in the direction of the road.

Captain La Paz ran to pick it up.

"It is true!" he cried, "there are three bullet-holes in the hat, and they are hardly an inch apart!"

The doctor cried out in wonder, and even the wounded colonel could not repress an exclamation at this proof of his opponent's skill with the pistol, and with the left hand, too.

"You see, gentlemen, that it is as I have told you," Talbot remarked. "If the colonel is unskilled in shooting with the left hand, for him to meet me in that way would savor more of an assassination than a duel."

"Yes, yes!" cried the captain and the doctor together.

And even the fiery Mexican colonel looked thoughtful, for at last he realized that the American was no boaster, as he had believed, and that if his antagonist had so willed the bullet could as easily have been driven through his heart as into his arm.

The escape of blood from his wound was beginning to tell upon De Janos now, and it was as much as he could do to replace the revolver in his belt, and hardly had he accomplished the task when he grew faint, and but for the assistance of the doctor would have fallen.

"Sit down, my dear colonel, and allow me to see if I cannot extract the ball," the surgeon said, assisting the Mexican to take a seat upon the sward.

"My box of instruments is in one of my holsters, captain; will you bring them, please?" continued the medical man.

And as the captain hurried to get the tools Mud Turtle advanced with the horses.

Talbot also came up.

"If I can be of any assistance, doctor, pray command me," the rancher said.

"Thank you, thank you; if you will aid me to get the coat off I shall be obliged."

The captain returned with the box of instruments, which also contained healing ointment and linen for bandages.

The coat and vest of the wounded man were removed, the shirt-sleeve cut open, and then, with the assistance of Captain La Paz and the American, the surgeon examined the wound.

"It is painful, but I do not think I am badly hurt," the colonel observed.

"You may thank fortune that it is only an ugly scratch," the doctor remarked; "the ball is near the surface and—"

The wounded man gave a start; an exclamation of pain came from his lips, and then the doctor held up the ball, which he had deftly extracted.

"There it is, my dear colonel, much better in my hand than in your body!" the surgeon remarked.

"Egad, I agree with you there!" exclaimed Colonel de Janos, with a sigh of relief.

"Now I will bandage the wound, and I do not think you will have any trouble with it. I ought to have been thoughtful enough to bring a little spirits along, for you need a stimulant now," the doctor observed, as he proceeded to dress and bandage the wound.

"I reckon I can supply you, Talbot remarked. "My red friend here rarely is to be found without a supply of fire-water."

With a grin Mud Turtle produced a pint flask from an inner pocket of his hunting-shirt and handed it to Talbot.

"You will be likely to find it a pretty good article as whisky goes on the frontier," the rancher remarked as he passed it to the doctor. "The chief is as good a judge of fire-water as you will be apt to strike anywhere, and he cannot be fooled with any liquid lightning."

The doctor took a swallow of the fluid, smacked his lips, and expressed the opinion that it was very fair whisky.

After the wound was dressed and bandaged, the colonel took a good pull at the flask and the potent liquor seemed to put new life into him.

The flask was returned to the Indian and De Janos, with the doctor's assistance, rose to his feet, his arm being put in a sling.

"How do you feel now?" the surgeon inquired.

"Oh, I am all right, I guess, a little weak, but an hour or two's rest will make me feel like myself again."

"Señor American," he continued, with a formal bow to Dick Talbot, "I am in your debt, and whether I will ever get a chance to pay you or not is a question."

"Do not allow it to trouble you," the rancher replied. "You can consider the affair ended now, or you can renew it at some future time, if you see fit to do so. I shall hold myself at your commands."

"Gentlemen, if you will allow me!" exclaimed the dapper little captain, "I would suggest that you consider the affair settled. Señor Talbot has shown that he is not afraid to back his words by deeds, and you, my dear colonel, have proved that you do not hesitate to meet death at the pistol's mouth when it is necessary to defend your honor. I am sure that Señor Talbot, after this encounter, regrets having applied an unbecoming epithet to you, as you, Colonel de Janos, undoubtedly regret the hasty remark which roused Señor Talbot's anger."

By this time the rage of the Mexican had abated, and as he reflected upon his narrow escape from death, the unpleasant conviction came to him that in attempting to prove that he was not the animal that Talbot had indicated in the beginning, he had acted very much as if he had a right to the name.

"I am sure that if Señor Talbot regrets the altercation I do most certainly," he remarked, just a little stiffly, for his pride had been terribly wounded by his defeat.

"Of course I am sorry the misunderstanding occurred," Talbot remarked. "I do not make a business of going through the country knocking chips from men's shoulders."

"We will consider the matter then ended, gentlemen!" exclaimed the captain.

The antagonists bowed.

"That is the way it ought to be," the doctor remarked. "And I am glad, colonel, that your wound is no worse."

"You do not think that it is severe enough to prevent me from taking command of the expedition?" the colonel asked.

"Oh, no; if it came to a hand-to-hand fight you would be rather at a disadvantage, but there is little danger of these miserable *ladrones* making a fight," the doctor observed. "They will be taken like so many rats in a trap, and although I have no doubt that they will attempt to resist, yet, after the first struggle, they will run like so many rabbits."

"Colonel, I trust you will excuse me for speaking," Talbot said. "I may be wrong, but it is my impression that it is *your* men who will be caught in the trap, and not the brigands, and, although you do not desire my assistance, yet I should like to accompany the expedition, merely as a looker-on, you understand."

The colonel hesitated for a moment; he was about to decline giving the required permission, and then the thought came to him that it would be rather of a triumph if the American was present to witness his victory over Bernal and his band, so he said:

"Well, although as a rule, on a secret expedition of this kind, I do not think it is advisable to permit civilians to accompany the troops, yet I will make an exception in favor of yourself—and I presume you wish the Indian to go also?"

"Oh, yes, he has been my faithful pard for years, and sticks to me like a brother," the rancher replied.

"Mud Turtle, big chief—heap warrior," the Indian remarked, with great dignity.

"The only trouble about the matter, as far as I can see, is that, in order to accompany the troops, yourself and companion will have to be made acquainted with the time when the expedition will start," the Mexican officer remarked, thoughtfully. "And that is a secret known only to his Excellency, the governor, and myself, and in case the brigands become informed of our approach, and we fail in our attempt to surprise them, the suspicion would naturally arise that either yourself or your companion had warned the outlaws."

"Yes, I comprehend," Talbot remarked. "But in this case I am sure that you are not giving Bernal credit for being as shrewd as he really is."

"I do not exactly understand," the colonel remarked.

"Why, this brigand is reputed to have spies in every village near which his band operates, and rumor says that for any important information he is always ready to pour out his gold as freely as though it was so much water," Talbot replied. "Now, as I said, you are not giving due credit to the shrewdness of the brigand if you imagine that he has not his spies right here in Alter, busily engaged in keeping an eye upon you; and, unless report greatly errs in its account of the man, his spies will be on the road hastening to convey the intelligence to him of any movement of the troops ten minutes after the men are called upon to prepare for the march."

The Mexican colonel shook his head.

"Oh, no, you are overrating this rascal!" he declared. "Undoubtedly he is a shrewd scoundrel, but I have taken due precautions. The troops are encamped a half-mile from the town, and in the direction in which the move is to be made; pickets will be placed well out from the camp so that no one can loiter near. The men will not be warned of the move until ten or fifteen minutes before the appointed time. They have been kept on the alert for three nights now, so that the summons will find them prepared when it comes, and as the move will not take place until late at night, or very early in the morning, I cannot conceive how it will be possible for the brigands to be warned of our advance."

From the confident way in which the colonel spoke, the rancher guessed that he had not had much experience in border warfare, for if so, and had ever attempted to chase the wily red-men amid their mountain haunts, he would not be so sure in regard to this point.

"Well, I will make a bargain with you, colonel," Talbot remarked. "Keep the secret in regard to the time of movement, and do not impart it to me. I will take my chances of being on hand after you get under way, if you are willing myself and pard should accompany you."

The Mexican was puzzled by this offer; he reflected upon it for a moment and then said:

"Very well, yourself and the Indian are welcome to join us on the march, but it is not likely that you will be able to do so."

"Time will tell," the rancher replied.

Then formal salutations were exchanged, the Mexicans mounted their horses and rode away.

"We must be on the watch to-night, Mud Turtle!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, "for unless I am greatly mistaken, the Mexicans will be on the march before another star breaks through the cold, gray clouds in the eastern skies."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE NIGHT SIGNALS.

NIGHT came on.

Thanks to the presence of the soldiers the village of Alter was unusually lively, but about nine o'clock the warriors departed for their camp, only a few of the higher officers remaining at the hotel, and the town began to assume its wonted appearance.

At eleven all the officers, even to the colonel, took a respectful leave of his Excellency, Don Phillip Torres, and departed for the camp; the governor's body-guard, a captain and twenty-five privates, alone remained at the hotel, for the bandit, Bernal, with his ferocious Hawks of Cababi, had performed so many audacious acts, that the governor did not feel safe in his neighborhood without the protection of a strong guard.

Twelve o'clock.

The moon rode high in the heavens, and the inhabitants of Alter slept as sleeps the innocent, whose dreams are troubled with no thoughts of guile.

No sound, or sign of life either in the town or in the encampment of the Mexican troops, out on the open prairie, with the exception of the double line of mounted sentinels who, stationed well out on the plain, kept watch and ward.

At one o'clock though there was a movement in the camp.

Men went hastily, but with the utmost caution, from tent to tent and roused the sleeping soldiers.

As the Mexican colonel had informed the rancher, the men had been warned that the summons might come at any time, so they were ready for it.

Within fifteen minutes from the time that the command was given, two hundred men were up and ready for an advance.

Fifty odd men were left to guard the camp, besides the pickets and sentinels who kept their positions so that from a distance, particularly in the direction of Alter, it was not apparent that anything unusual had taken place.

The soldiers filed out of the camp, leading their horses, in little squads of ten, led by the petty officers, heading due westward, so that the camp was between them and the town of Alter to conceal the movement.

Colonel De Janos with his chief officers, and the rancher, John Gallego, was the first party to leave the camp.

A quarter of a mile off the flat prairie ended,

and a rolling one, studded with clumps of bushes and small timber, began.

At this point the colonel halted, then all mounted their steeds and waited until the troops came up.

As the little squads arrived the officer formed them into their respective companies, and then, when all the men were on the ground and in the saddle, the colonel gave the command for an advance, and away they went, De Janos and the rancher in the advance.

The movement was performed without blast of bugle or any of the pride and pomp of war, the only sound being the low order of the officer, followed by the hoof-beats of the wiry Mexican horses, which the soldiers rode, upon the soft prairie soil.

"There are two courses open to us," the rancher remarked, as the party rode onward at a brisk trot.

"Two?" the colonel asked.

"Yes, one by way of the Rio Alter, following the stream until we strike the point where the North Fork empties into it, then follow that river up. The other course is to go across country without troubling ourselves to go near the Rio Alter and strike the North Fork well up from its junction with the main river; the road is not as good, but it is a half shorter."

"We will take the latter, then, by all means, for we have no time to waste," the colonel replied. "Can we cover it in four hours?"

"Oh, yes, easily."

"That will bring us then in the neighborhood of the outlaws' retreat about five in the morning, and as these ladrones are seldom early risers, we can hardly fail to surprise them."

"By the way, colonel," said the doctor, who rode by the side of the Mexican commander, "I fancy we have given the American the slip."

"Ah, yes, and he was so certain he would be on hand," the colonel remarked, sarcastically. "He's a shrewd fellow enough, but the precautions you took were too much for him," the surgeon observed, with a chuckle.

Hardly had the words left his lips, when out from the cover of a clump of trees, a hundred feet or so ahead, rode Dick Talbot and the red chief.

Both of them had repeating rifles carried across the horns of their saddles.

The captain in command of the first squadron gave a short, quick command to his men, and the words were followed by the rattle of the carbines as the troops prepared for action.

"It is all right, Captain Lopes, they are friends!" the colonel hastened to exclaim.

Another command and the troopers replaced their carbines.

"Well, well, we did not succeed in stealing a march upon you after all!" the doctor exclaimed, as the party came up to the two men and they fell in with them.

"I told you I would take my chances," Talbot replied.

"Señor, I really have a curiosity to know how you managed it?" the colonel exclaimed.

"It was simple enough," Talbot answered.

"The Indian arranged it. He has an eye like a hawk, and he laid at full length upon the prairie at such a distance from your camp that it was not possible for the sentinels to make him out, but it was not difficult for him to detect the movements of a large body of men, and when he became satisfied that the expedition was under way he came straight to me. I, with the horses, was hid in the nearest timber. Then, understanding the direction which you would take, it was an easy matter to lay our course so as to intercept you."

"Well, Señor American, I must admit that you have accomplished more than I thought you would be able to do," the colonel remarked.

"But if it had not been for your red-skin friend I doubt if you could have managed the matter so nicely."

"Very true; yet I have an idea that the Indian was not the only one who played the spy upon you."

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, I really cannot give you a reason; it is simply a conjecture, that is all."

And just at that moment Talbot happened to cast a glance behind him. It was pure accident, nothing else, but he immediately called to the Mexican officer:

"Quick, colonel! look behind you at the sky!"

The colonel turned in the saddle, as also did the rest of the party.

Afar off in the direction of the town of Alter a bright spark of fire was sinking in the sky.

"Ah, yes; a falling star—is that a prophecy of good or evil fortune for our expedition, think you?" the Mexican commander asked.

"No, no, colonel; that was no falling star!" Talbot exclaimed.

"What was it then—a meteor?"

"Oh, no; no heavenly body at all."

"What could it be?" the Mexican commander exclaimed, in wonder.

"A signal-rocket!"

"A signal-rocket!" cried the colonel, and the rest echoed the words.

"Yes, that is what it was," the American as-

serted. "Fired somewhere in the neighborhood of Alter by a confederate of this brigand Bernal to warn him that the troops are on the move to attack him in his stronghold."

"We were not in time to see the rocket explode, but the spark of fire, which did indeed look like a falling star, was the rocket-stick making its way to the earth."

"It does not seem possible!" the Mexican colonel exclaimed.

"If you find the brigands ready to receive you, it will be apt to make you believe it," Talbot remarked.

"This rocket business is a shrewd dodge," the rancher continued. "On a clear night like this such a signal can easily be distinguished for fifteen or twenty miles, and the outlaw, no doubt, has men stationed with instructions to watch for the rocket and to bring the news to him the moment the signal is given. Mark my words, colonel, although you have made this night movement on purpose to surprise the outlaws you will find them prepared to give you a warm reception."

The Mexican rancher had betrayed decided symptoms of uneasiness all through this discussion, and now he spoke:

"I think, Señor American, that you are deceived," he remarked, with the air of a man who had been giving anxious thought to the subject. "I have often seen these falling stars, and if I am any judge in the matter that spark of fire was a star and nothing else."

"Well, it really seemed to me as though it was a star," the doctor observed.

Talbot smiled at the incredulity displayed.

"Wait until we strike the defiles of the North Fork of the Rio Alter and you all may have good reason to change your minds," he remarked.

As the trail was a tolerably plain one, the troops got over the ground at a fair rate of speed, and just as the first gray light of the morning was lining the eastern skies the command struck the stream for which they were bound.

The country had now become rough and broken, but as the light was strengthening rapidly the troopers were able to keep on at a good pace.

Some five or six miles up the stream the expedition advanced, and then the rugged defiles, interspersed with the little fertile valleys, began.

After passing through the first defile, a halt was called in the valley beyond for the purpose of watering the horses.

"There, this is as far as I have ever gone," the Mexican rancher observed, with a careful glance around him, "and as I cannot be of service as a guide any longer, I will fall back in the rear, and, too, according to the report brought by my peons, you are near the brigands' lair; so it is likely that you may come upon them at any moment now, and it would be as well to prepare."

"Having got us into the trap, you are afraid that some of the bullets may hit you, eh?" exclaimed Talbot, in a jocular tone, and he smiled as if he thought he had given utterance to a good joke.

The rancher turned pale.

"Oh, señor, do not jest—it is no time for jesting!" he exclaimed.

"Colonel, as myself and pard were not to do any fighting, we will drop back to the rear, too, when you advance," Talbot remarked. "And as I have an idea that you are going to have a fight on your hands within the next fifteen minutes, suppose you leave about twenty men with me here to hold this valley, so that if any trap is sprung upon you, your retreat cannot be cut off?"

For a wonder the colonel acceded to the request, and then onward into the defile went the command.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FIGHT.

THE unwillingness of the rancher to longer keep at the head of the troops had convinced Talbot that the crisis was near at hand, and he was old soldier enough to know that if the troops fell into an ambushade in the next defile, or the one that succeeded it, it would be the brigand's game to detach a force and occupy these lower passes so as to harass the soldiers on their retreat.

As will be seen, Talbot felt perfectly satisfied that the troopers were going to get the worst of the fight, although they outnumbered the outlaws five to one.

"Now, boys, dismount, and fasten your horses to a lariat so that they cannot be stampeded," Talbot commanded, setting the example by dismounting, as also did the Indian.

"Well, as I don't care to risk my life in a fight, I will get out of the way," the rancher said; he had watched this maneuver with a dissatisfied eye, and now gathered up his reins as if to depart.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed the American, "I cannot spare you yet awhile. You must dismount and stay with us until this little affair is ended."

The rancher immediately became indignant. "Look ye, Señor American, I am not under

your command, and I will go when I please!" he declared.

"Indeed you will not!" Talbot replied, firmly. "You are under my command, and not a foot do you stir until the rest of us are ready to go."

"This is outrageous!" the rancher protested. "What do you mean by treating me in this manner? I will complain to the colonel!"

"Complain all you like!" Talbot rejoined. "Heaven forbid that I should deprive you of that satisfaction, but you must do as I command. I do not mind telling you that I haven't the best opinion in the world of a man about your size."

"Eh, what do you mean?" exclaimed Gallego, astonished at this statement.

"I think that you are a spy in league with these outlaws, and that you have led the command into a trap."

The rancher became nervous and excited, and got very red in the face.

"Such an accusation is monstrous!" he exclaimed. "I am an honest man, every one that knows me will testify to that effect. Of course I have led the way to the locality where the brigands are supposed to have their hiding-place, and if the information given me by my peons is not false, the soldiers will undoubtedly encounter the outlaws. And I am risking my life too by thus aiding justice, for if the brigands are not exterminated by this raid, and my share in it is discovered, it will surely cost me my life. The peons were so certain of this fact, that although they discovered the outlaws' hiding-place and imparted the knowledge to me, yet no sum of money that could be offered would tempt them to personally lead the soldiers."

"That is all right, but I am not at all satisfied, so down you get! It will not harm you to remain with us and see this little thing through. Dismount, sir, I want no more words about the matter!"

The tone in which Talbot spoke showed the rancher that the American meant every word he said, and so he dismounted, in his heart cursing the evil luck which had led the American to join the party.

Then Talbot had the horses taken and concealed in a little clump of timber which grew near the center of the valley.

He selected two of the soldiers who appeared to be more intelligent than the rest and placed them in charge of the horses, and the rancher was instructed to go with the steeds.

"Now, as I calculate to have a little surprise-party on my own hook," Talbot said to Gallego, "I warn you not to attempt to give any warning to your friends, the brigands, for if you do it will surely cost you your life. I am thoroughly in earnest in this matter and mean exactly what I say!"

"For the love of all the saints! I beg that you will not be hasty, Señor American!" the rancher pleaded. "As I am a living man I swear to you I will be as quiet as a mouse!"

"If you are wise you will be so," Talbot replied, significantly.

Then, in company with the Indian, Injun Dick made a brief survey of the ground.

There were three ways by which entrance could be gained into the valley; by means of the trail from the south, through the lower pass, the way the expedition had come, by the same trail from the north, the way the troopers had gone, and through the broken, irregular country to the west.

On the east the pine-clad hills rose so steeply that access was impossible.

"If it is the outlaws' plan to attack the soldiers in one of the upper passes, he will probably detach a small force to ambuscade them here in their retreat, and the most likely way for the rascals to come is from the west, so we will post our men to command the approach from that direction."

Mud Turtle, who had the genius which would have caused him to rank high as a general if he had been given the opportunity to exhibit it in civilized warfare, when the fate of nations depended upon the issue, agreed that this was the best arrangement which could be made, and it was immediately carried out.

Within five minutes the men were so carefully ambushed that any one looking upon the valley from the western slope would never have guessed that well-armed men, ready for blood and slaughter, were concealed amid the bushes and behind the rocks.

Hardly had the soldiers become comfortably settled in their hiding-places when notes of the bugles and the roar and rattle of firearms broke the stillness of the mountain passes.

"Mebbe soldiers find brigands," Mud Turtle suggested to Talbot.

The two had found concealment in a clump of bushes, which were amply thick enough to shield them from distant observation and yet enabled them to command a view of the hillside down which they expected the outlaws to come.

"Yes, that sounds like a skirmish, but I think it is much more likely that the brigands have found the soldiers," Talbot rejoined.

And now, leaving Talbot and his force in

their ambush, we will follow the fortunes of the Mexican colonel.

Before entering the defile the colonel had prepared for action. Two companies were placed in the advance, then came the colonel and his staff, and then the main body.

They passed through the rocky pass, and as the head of the column entered the valley, the eyes of the soldiers were gladdened by the sight of a collection of rude huts.

Quickly the word was passed from man to man until it reached the ears of the rear guard. The brigands' lair was found.

With extreme caution the troops deployed into the valley, and formed a line of battle.

It appeared now as if the surprise would be complete, for there was nothing to show that the brigands—asleep in the huts as all the force believed—had the least idea that a foe had penetrated to their stronghold.

"We shall make a complete success of it," the colonel remarked, cautiously, to the doctor, while an exultant smile appeared on his face.

"Yes, the scoundrels will be decidedly astonished when they wake and find themselves as securely caged as a lot of rats in a trap," the doctor observed.

"The American was wrong, you see, with his ridiculous notion about the signal racket," the colonel remarked.

"Yes, yes, he is a shrewd fellow, too, but then no matter how shrewd a man is, it is not possible for him to be always right," the doctor rejoined.

By this time the troops were ready for the advance, and at the command of the colonel the squadron was set in motion.

They advanced at a slow trot, each trooper with his carbine ready cocked for action.

Every moment they expected to see the startled outlaws rush from their rude huts, panic-stricken by the unexpected attack, but the soldiers rode within five hundred feet of the huts and yet no signs of life appeared.

"Sound a charge, buglers, and wake the rascals up!" the colonel commanded.

Shrill on the clear, still air rose the notes of the buglers, and the soldiers with a cheer dashed onward.

A hundred feet from the huts, and yet no brigands, and then—without the slightest warning—a terrible fire was poured into the attackers from the steep hillside to the left of the valley—a regular sheet of flame, and twenty saddles were emptied by the volley.

"We are in a trap, by heaven!" cried the colonel, "but we will have the scoundrels yet!"

The advance had been immediately checked by the fierce fire and the line for a moment thrown into confusion, but this was speedily remedied by the officers, and then the troopers fired a volley at the concealed foe.

It was fired at random, for all that denoted that an enemy was intrenched on the hillside was the little rings of smoke curling up from the bushes.

Again another destructive volley was returned and some fifteen more men went down.

Then the colonel gave the order—which he should have issued in the first place—to dismount, leave the horses in charge of the soldiers whose duty it was to look after the steeds, one man to each ten horses, and attempt to dislodge the ambushed men from their position by a charge on foot.

The movement was hurriedly performed, and from the way the troopers formed into line it could plainly be seen that they had little liking for the task.

There was considerable confusion, and the line was by no means a good one when the colonel gave the word to charge.

The bugles sounded and a faint cheer went up from the men as they advanced.

About fifty feet the irregular line came on—just reached the edge of the hillside, when a most destructive fire was poured into them.

The hillside seemed to fairly blaze with flame.

The brigands were using their revolvers, a pair to each man, and firing as fast as they could discharge the weapons.

Even the bravest soldiers in the world might be pardoned for "breaking" under such a fire, and these Mexican troops were far from being good soldiers.

They fired an irregular volley, then the line broke and the troopers fled toward their horses in wild confusion.

It was each man for himself and Satan take the hindmost.

Then, as the Mexicans fled, the whole hillside became alive with brigands yelling at the top of their lungs and discharging their weapons.

The troopers fled for their lives, leaving their colonel stretched upon the field.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MEXICANS ARE SATISFIED.

WITH anxious ears Talbot and those with him listened to the sounds which indicated so plainly that a fierce conflict was going on.

"They are having it hot and heavy," he remarked to the Indian.

"Yes, soldiers getting licked," responded the chief with true savage brevity.

"Well, they certainly ought to be able to hold their own," Talbot rejoined. "They have men enough, but then the outlaws have probably caught them in a trap, and they have too all the advantage of the ground. If Bernal and his men occupy a strong position on the hillside—and it will be his game to work the thing in that way—it will not be possible for the mounted men to do anything until they forsake their steeds."

"Bang, bang!" exclaimed the red-skin, as a fresh roar of musketry rose on the air, "heap big fight!"

"Yes, and from the irregularity of the firing it seems as if the brigands were doing the most of the shooting, or else the troops have become demoralized and each man is fighting on his own hook."

There was a brief lull in the sounds of war, and then the bugles, sounding the charge, rung out.

"The troops are not whipped yet, evidently," Talbot observed.

His observations were cut short by the volley of shots which so quickly succeeded the bugle-blast.

"Aha!" Talbot exclaimed as shot succeeded shot, "they are at close quarters now, for that is the sharp crack of revolvers."

And while they were listening to the sound of the battle, their eyes were anxiously fixed on the hillside down which the foe was expected to advance.

But no foe appeared.

"It may be possible that we were barking up the wrong tree when we calculated that the brigands would attempt to take the troops in the rear," Talbot remarked. "I don't believe he has men enough to try that game, and in the face of such a large force he would not dare to divide his command. I reckon he is going to content himself with giving the soldiers a thrashing, and will allow them to run away as fast as they like without molestation."

Hardly had he finished the speech, when high on the air resounded the noise made by the fugitives in their tumultuous retreat through the rocky defile.

Talbot jumped to his feet and the Indian followed his example.

"By Jove! that sounds as if our men had got a thrashing and were retreating with the outlaws in full pursuit!" the rancher cried.

By this time all the Mexicans were on their feet.

"Bring out the horses!" Talbot cried. "Up into the saddle, men! We will take a position by the mouth of the pass so as to engage the brigands if they are after our men and give them time to re-form."

The Mexicans sprang to the backs of their steeds with prompt alacrity enough, but when they were in the saddle they looked at each other in a peculiar way.

The expression upon their faces seemed to say:

"Does this mad American think that we, a mere handful of men, will be able to check these brigands, who have succeeded in whipping some two hundred of our comrades?"

Out from the defile came the soldiers, all semblance of discipline gone—a mob of fugitives, privates and officers all mixed in together; in a flight like this there was no thought of rank.

Wild with terror, each man rode as if he was firmly convinced that his only chance for life lay in the speed and endurance of his horse.

And yet they were not pursued, for the outlaws had merely contented themselves with chasing the mob into the defile, and then, posting a strong guard there, so as to have ample warning if the troopers recovered from their panic, and advanced for another attack, proceeded to collect the arms, which many of the panic-stricken soldiers had cast away, and to pillage the dead and wounded.

As the panic-stricken men came tearing out of the defile, Talbot rode forward and endeavored to rally them, but he might just as well have talked to as many lunatics, so deeply were the troopers terrified.

"The brigands—the brigands!" they cried. "Two hundred or more! Gracious saints! the country is alive with them! Ride for your life or you will be slain!"

With these exclamations, and a dozen similar ones, the American's efforts were greeted.

He saw, too, that his men were becoming infected with this awful terror, and the thought occurred to him that if the brigands did make their appearance, his force would be far more apt to join the rest in the retreat than endeavor to make a stand.

"When you are in Rome do as the Romans do!" he muttered, between his teeth. "If it came to a fight these cowards would be apt to run at the first crack of a gun and leave Mud Turtle and myself to carry on the war, so, vamo!" he cried.

Gladly the troopers obeyed the order, and joined the retreat.

The rancher had already gone; he stole away the moment he was able to do so without attracting Talbot's attention.

Through the rocky pass, and down the rough,

irregular trail by the river's bank, the fugitives went, and none of them attempted to draw rein until they crossed the North Fork of the Alter at the same ford which they had passed only a short time ago, when they had advanced, feeling sure that they would make short work of the brigands.

By this time the horses were tired and short of wind; for they had been pushed forward at an unmerciful pace over the rough road; and as the troopers had put a good six miles between themselves and the valley, wherein they had met with such a disaster, and no evidence had presented itself that the outlaws were hot on their track, eager for more blood, the horsemen slackened their pace.

Talbot had looked for the colonel, and not finding him, inquired in regard to his fate, but none of the troopers to whom he spoke could give him any information.

None of them knew whether the colonel had fallen in the fight or was among the fugitives.

At last, Talbot encountered the surgeon and Captain La Paz.

"Ah, my dear American, you were right for a thousand ounces!" Doctor Garcia exclaimed. "If we had not been so blinded with our own conceit, and had paid more attention to your warnings, it is possible that we should not have made such a terrible mess of this expedition. In all my military experience I never knew a more disgraceful affair."

And then Señor Garcia related the particulars of the fight.

"But where is Colonel De Janos?" the rancher asked, when the recital ended.

"He fell in the fight," the doctor replied, with a sad shake of the head. "I saw him go down, but whether he was only wounded or killed outright I do not know. At that moment the panic seized upon our men and I was carried away by the rush."

"It has been a most disastrous affair!" the captain exclaimed. "It has cost us nearly one-half our force."

"Yes, but even now you outnumber the outlaws three to one," Talbot urged. "Why not make an attempt to rally the men and return? The brigands would be apt to be taken unawares now, and the fortunes of the day might be retrieved."

Three more officers had ridden up to the party in time to hear this proposition, and one of them was the lieutenant-colonel, upon whom the command of the regiment now devolved.

He was a fat, pompous-looking man, who had evidently never been designed by nature to make his mark in the field of war.

In the Mexican Army, as in the military forces of greater nations, merit was not so sure a stepping-stone to rank as influence.

"My dear American, the idea is utterly out of the question!" the major declared. "Our men are good enough—as good as any in the service—but they cannot, in reason, be expected to contend with such demons as these accursed brigands."

"Unless you had chanced to be in the fight, it is impossible for you to conceive how furiously these outlaws fought," the major continued, and in this statement the rest agreed with him.

"And, my dear sir, whoever reported that there were only some thirty or forty of the brigands knows absolutely nothing about the matter," the officer added. "As I was in the front of the attack I had an opportunity to see how strong the brigands are, and, in my opinion, they had over a hundred men engaged in the action."

Talbot glanced at the Indian when this statement was made, and the red-skin shook his head gravely, and the expression upon his massive features conveyed the idea to the rancher that Mud Turtle regarded the major as being the champion liar.

"Then you do not think that it is worth while to attempt a rally and another attack on the outlaws?" Talbot asked.

All the Mexican officers shook their heads with surprising unanimity.

"It is impossible!" the major declared.

"I doubt, after the terrible defeat which they have experienced, if you could get them to face the outlaws until they have time to recover from the shock," Captain La Paz observed.

"Besides, if you notice, about half of them have thrown their carbines away," the doctor remarked. "They did that so that the horses would not be burdened by the weight and so would be able to run the faster."

"Yes, I see; it appears to have been a case of each man for himself and devil take the hindmost," the rancher remarked, gravely.

"My dear American, if you had been in the fight I fancy you would have become as panic-stricken as the rest of us," the major declared.

"Oh, yes, no doubt," Talbot responded, dryly, and the Indian stuck his tongue in his cheek in a very peculiar way.

"I am sorry that I was not in with my cowboys, as I suggested," the rancher continued.

"Because we could have beaten you in the race from the battle-field, even if we could not have shown how to whip these scoundrels."

The Mexicans did not know exactly what to make of this speech, for Talbot's face was

grave, and no one from his manner could have told that he was poking fun at the others.

"It was a lucky thing for you and your men that you were not in the conflict," the major remarked, "for it would surely have cost some of your lives."

"Maybe so," Talbot remarked.

CHAPTER XIX.

MANY THINGS.

By the time that Alter was reached the soldiers had entirely recovered from their panic, and the officers succeeded in getting the disorderly mob into something like military discipline again.

But a decided contrast the regiment presented when it reached its camp, from the body of men who had started forth that morning under the cover of the darkness.

In their headlong flight the soldiers had ridden through bush and briar, so that many of the gaudy uniforms had suffered; quite a number had been wounded, more or less severely, and their clothes were stained with blood.

As it happened, the Governor of Sonora, Don Phillip Torres, was in camp; he had come there with his escort so as to be ready to receive the troops on their triumphant return with the captured brigands, for the thought that the outlaws would succeed in whipping the soldiers never entered his mind.

He had been afraid that the troops might not succeed in their attempt to surprise the outlaws, and that Bernal and his men, by taking to flight, possibly would be able to escape, but that they would boldly give battle, and repulse his warriors, was such a preposterous idea that his mind had never harbored it.

The governor was with a group of officers in the colonel's tent when the approach of the troops was made known to him, and so loose was the discipline of the Mexicans that the new-comers were within a thousand yards of the camp before their approach was announced to the governor.

That gentleman immediately hurried out, followed by the officers, all eager to learn how Colonel de Janos had succeeded.

All the soldiers of the camp were on the alert, and were gazing with amazement upon the sorry-looking troops, so different in their appearance from the trim soldiers who had set out that morning.

The astonishment of the governor was unbounded.

The appearance of the troopers, the absence of nearly one-half of the force, as well as the fact that they bore no outlaw prisoners with them, plainly revealed what had occurred.

"Saints in heaven!" cried Don Phillip Torres, in profound amazement, "our men have been beaten by these miserable ladrones! Who would have believed that such a thing could be possible?"

The troopers filed into the camp, ranks were broken, and the lieutenant-colonel proceeded to relate what had taken place.

Talbot and the Indian sat on their horses in the rear neighborhood, and it was as much as the pair could do to keep a straight face while they listened to the words of the Mexican officer.

By this time he was certain that the "bloody-handed wretch," Bernal, had at least from a hundred and fifty to two hundred men, and as he had the troops in a trap it was impossible for them to win a victory, although they fought like demons.

It was a grandiloquent tale and somewhat soothed the governor's agitation.

"Ah, well, of course, under the circumstances such a defeat is no disgrace," Don Phillip remarked. "But I will make this day's work come dearly to Bernal before I am through with him!" he declared.

"I will summon two more regiments and put a force in the field against which he will not be able to contend!" the official continued, puffing out his cheeks and assuming a bold, warlike air.

"Nay, more, I will offer a reward of fifty silver ounces for the capture of any man in the brigands' band, dead or alive, and a hundred ounces for the head of the brigand chief, Bernal!"

The Mexican officers at once applauded the resolution.

"Ah, gentlemen, you will see that in an extremely short time I will make this country too hot to hold these outlaws!" the governor declared, and then with the officers he returned to the tent from whence he had come, without taking any notice of the American.

"Well, Mud Turtle, I reckon we haven't any more business in Alter, or its neighborhood, and so we will pull out for our ranch," Dick Talbot observed.

"Mexicans have heap chin-music," the red-skin declared, with a contemptuous expression on his massive features; "talk much—do very little."

"Yes, and I fancy that it will be a long time before they catch this brigand, from the way they are going to work," Talbot remarked.

"Putting a price upon his head will not worry him much, for he knows mighty well that none

of the townsmen or ranchers in this section will be anxious to earn it. A hundred ounces would be a small fortune to many of them, but they understand well enough that the man who goes in to capture or kill Bernal takes his life in his hand, and the money will not be any temptation to them."

The pair had put their horses in motion during the speech, and were now riding northward toward the American line.

"The big Mexican thinks two—three heaps of soldiers, mebbe, catch Bernal. Ugh!" and Mud Turtle shook his head to show that he did not agree with his Excellency, the Governor of Sonora.

"Bernal like flea—you go catch him—he no thar!" the red-skin continued.

"Yes, that is undoubtedly the game he will play," Talbot responded. "He has his spies all through the district in which he operates, as I told these dull-witted, arrogant military jack-daws, but they would not listen to me, and when any move is made against him he has full and early information in regard to it."

"They no catch 'um!" Mud Turtle asserted in a tone of conviction.

"That is my opinion. This affair will kick up a great row; the governor, in order to satisfy the home government that he is doing all in his power to catch the robber, will bring four or five hundred men into this district, and the brigand, being informed of every move on the part of the authorities, and knowing that it will not be possible to defeat so large a force, will not attempt to fight them, but seek safety in flight. The soldiers will scour the country, and not being successful in discovering any trace of the outlaws, will report that the brigands have disbanded."

"They fool 'um!" observed the red-skin, sagely.

"Then, after the troops have departed, Bernal will soon be at his old tricks again."

"Big chief!" the Indian exclaimed.

"Yes, he, apparently, is a far better man than any of these officers who are opposed to him."

"Well, as far as I am concerned, I cannot hope for aid from these Mexicans. It will take them two or three weeks to concentrate their troops, and until another regiment or two arrives they will not attempt to make any movement against Bernal, so I will have to depend upon what cowboys I can get together."

"Yes, cowboys fight—Mexicans run," the red-skin remarked.

"If I can get ten or twelve good men I may be able to worry these outlaws," Talbot observed. "Now that they have succeeded in whipping the soldiers so soundly, they will not be apt to think there is any danger to be apprehended from any other quarter. Their calculation will be that they are safe until the fresh troops arrive, and they will depend upon their spies to keep them posted in regard to that."

"A raid on them by the cowboys will be about the last thing they will expect; they will not be on their guard and I may be able to strike them unawares."

Mud Turtle nodded his head in token that he approved of the plan.

"I will keep the matter quiet so that Bernal's spies cannot warn him, and the first intelligence he will have of the expedition will be when we strike him."

"It is good!" the Indian remarked.

"I must get the men together as soon as possible, for the quicker we get after Bernal the better will be our chance to surprise him."

The red-skin agreed that this was correct, and the two rode for the ranch as rapidly as possible.

In due time they arrived, and Talbot immediately proceeded to the task of selecting the men who he judged would be valuable in such an expedition.

He was obliged to proceed cautiously, for he had a suspicion that the brigand had a spy right in his own ranch, for he employed quite a number of peons and Mexicans, and Talbot knew that the success of the enterprise depended upon his keeping the matter a profound secret.

There were five good men in his employ—all Americans, who he felt sure could be trusted to fight to the death, and from the neighboring ranches he secured five more, so that with himself and the Indian there were twelve men, and from his knowledge of the cowboys he felt certain that they could be depended upon to whip twenty-five or thirty brigands in a fair, stand-up fight, but this was not the kind of struggle in which he proposed to engage.

It was his plan to play upon the outlaws the same game which they had played upon the Mexican troops so successfully.

He was going to tempt them into an ambuscade and fight them in Indian fashion from behind rocks, trees and bushes.

It took Talbot two days to get his men and make the necessary preparations for the trip. It was slow work, for everything had to be done secretly, for fear that some of the brigand's spies might get wind of the expedition, and any such piece of ill-luck would have upset everything.

It was arranged to start late at night, taking

advantage of the cover of darkness to get away without any one being the wiser for it, but on the night fixed for the start, a fierce rain set in, the water coming down in torrents, and that forced a postponement.

The following night was clear, though, and the expedition started, and so carefully had the arrangements been made that not a soul outside from those in the secret suspected that there was anything on foot.

The party pursued the same trail that Talbot and the Indian had followed when they tracked the brigands to their lair amid the passes of the North Fork of the Alter.

And as Talbot was well acquainted with the trail now, the party pushed on at a good rate.

When they arrived at the spot amid the wild foot-hills where Talbot and Mud Turtle had concealed their horses, the party dismounted, left the steeds in the timber clump, with a man to guard them, and then advanced on foot.

Daylight had come, and the dark clouds of night had vanished, when the adventurers entered the wild pass, from the edge of which Talbot and the Indian had peered forth and watched the brigands keeping watch and ward in the little valley below.

"Be cautious, boys," Talbot warned. "We are on dangerous ground now!"

With the stealthy tread of Indian warriors they advanced.

CHAPTER XX.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

THE plan which Talbot had devised was an extremely simple one.

He and the Indian were to advance into the valley, just as though they were on a scouting expedition, leaving the rest of the party concealed amid the bushes and rocks.

He assumed that he would find the brigand sentinel and the picket guard posted as they had been before.

They would advance on the outlaws—a fight of course would take place, and as there were only seven or eight in the party, Talbot calculated that he and Mud Turtle would be able to hold their own.

The noise of the fight would be certain to attract the attention of the rest of the brigands and they, undoubtedly, would hasten to the assistance of their brothers, then Talbot and the Indian would retreat, the outlaws would pursue, eager to punish the bold invaders of their mountain home, and thus would be led into the ambushade.

It was Talbot's calculation that the ambushade would make enough of the brigands bite the dust, so that his party would be able to charge and drive the outlaws right before them, and the cowboys would be so close upon the surprised foe, that the outlaws would not be able to make a stand, or improve the advantage of the ground, which would otherwise be much in their favor.

With the utmost caution then, the adventurers stole forward; Talbot and the Indian were in the advance, but as they peered forth from the bushes, behind which they sought concealment, a low exclamation of astonishment came from their lips.

And no wonder, for the valley was deserted—as innocent of human life as though no man's foot had stepped within it since the creation day.

"What does this mean?" Talbot asked, in a cautious whisper, of the Indian. "Is it a trap?"

"Have the brigands, despite all my precautions, been warned of this expedition?"

"No seem possible," Mud Turtle answered.

"That is true, and we have pushed on at such a rate of speed, too, that no spy could have beaten us, unless he started hours before we did."

"Don't know what make," Mud Turtle remarked.

"If it is a trap the outlaws are probably waiting for us in the defile below," Talbot observed, thoughtfully. "Suppose that we try a scout and see if we can discover anything?"

The Indian nodded, as much as to say that he approved of the plan.

Talbot then called his men together and explained his new scheme.

"I am afraid that the rascals have been warned of our approach and have arranged some nice little trap for us," the rancher said. "They are probably ambushed in the rocky pass which lies below this valley. Now, Mud Turtle and I will scout in and see if we can find out how the land lays; after we are well off, say in ten minutes, you all advance, each man on his own hook, and take advantage of all the concealment that offers."

"If we discover the enemy and you hear shots, don't rush forward to our support, but stay where you are; we will retreat and so lead the brigands into the range of your fire."

The cowboys nodded to show they comprehended what was required, and then Talbot and the Indian set out.

Both of them were experts in this sort of thing, and the way they made their way over

the ground would have excited the envy of the best Indian-fighter that ever followed a trail.

They passed through the valley without being able to discover any traces that the brigands had been there recently, but then this was not strange, for the fierce rain-storm would be apt to obliterate the marks.

As the pair approached the entrance of the rocky pass, they proceeded with increased caution.

The defile was only a couple of hundred feet wide, the walls rising canyon-like on each side; the stream flowed close to the eastern wall, and the space between the river and the wall on the west was rough and irregular, dotted with huge rocks and variegated with clumps of bushes.

A better place for an ambushade could hardly have been found in all the wild Western land.

But the daring adventurers had one advantage on their side.

If the rocks and bushes afforded cover for their foes, they also afforded them protection.

The greatest danger was in the approach, which had to be through the open valley, and after this space was passed—both of the scouts while crossing it had expected each moment to hear the sharp crack of a fire-arm break the stillness of the air—and the defile was entered, the pair breathed more freely.

The two were nestled behind a little clump of pines and through the scraggy branches they peered down the defile.

As in the valley no signs of life were visible.

"I say, Mud Turtle, what do you think of this?" Talbot asked, puzzled at not having run across the brigands.

"Dunno," responded the red-skin, with a dubious shake of the head.

"If the scoundrels are holding this defile the time for them to have shown themselves was when we were in the valley. In a fight amid these rocks Jack is as good as his master."

"Yes, mebbe better."

"I begin to think that we are going to surprise these fellows. I don't believe they have any pickets out at all."

"Mebbe not," the Indian responded.

And then another idea occurred to Talbot.

"Perhaps the rascals have moved further down the stream," the sport suggested. "As I am not acquainted with the locality it is a hard matter for me to tell how far we really are from the point where the Mexicans got so unmercifully thrashed, but I had an idea that we were not far from it."

"Chief thinks that way, too," Mud Turtle remarked.

"Well, if two old mountain-men like you and I come to the same conclusion without consultation, the opinion ought to be a pretty sound one."

"Yes, no fool us much," the red-skin remarked.

"Not as a rule; but as this is a strange country to both of us, there would be nothing wonderful in our being out of the way a mile or so. But we will soon know the truth, for this pass is not a large one, and when we arrive at the end I presume we will come to another valley like the one above."

"Mebbe."

"And in that valley we ought to strike some signs of our game, for it does not seem as if the scoundrels would have posted their pickets far from the main body."

"No, not many men there—one big rush—clean 'um all out," Mud Turtle observed, sagely.

"That is my calculation; that picket guard which stopped our advance the other day could not have been far from the main body. The rest of the gang must have been within easy reaching distance, so that if an attack was made upon the picket they could fall back without danger of being cut off."

By this time the rest of the men had come up and Talbot briefly explained the situation to them.

That the brigands would be found in the next valley was the opinion of all of the party, and the most of them thought there was a good chance, the rascals would not keep a careful watch, not anticipating that there was any danger of their being attacked after having disposed of the Mexicans so handsomely.

Again the advance began, the party proceeding in the same cautious manner as before, Talbot and the Indian in the advance.

The surmise of the adventurers was correct; at the end of the rocky pass was another valley, larger than the first one, and in the center of the open glade, convenient to the bank of the stream, stood a number of rudely-constructed huts.

The objective point of the expedition was reached. Talbot and the cowboys looked upon the retreat of Fernando Bernal and his outlaw band.

But not a sign of life was visible—a circumstance which greatly puzzled the adventurers.

Of course it was possible that the brigands were all asleep, still it was not probable; and so shrewd a rascal as the brigand captain would not be apt to allow his camp to go unguarded.

"We have tracked our game to the lair," Talbot observed to Mud Turtle.

The Indian shook his head in a doubtful sort of way.

"Plenty huts—no men," the red-skin answered.

"It does seem rather odd; the encampment seems to be deserted."

"Mebbe some trick," Mud Turtle suggested, with true Indian caution.

"A trap, eh?"

"Mebbe so."

"In case the scoundrels expected our approach, it would be probable enough, but from the way we have managed the affair I do not think it is possible that they could have got wind of our expedition," Talbot remarked. "A more reasonable explanation would be that, after having whipped the Mexican troops, the outlaws came to the conclusion to seek some other abiding-place, reasoning that the Mexicans, burning to avenge their defeat, would return with an overpowering force, and the outlaw chief was smart enough to know that he could not hope to lead the troops into the same trap a second time."

The Indian nodded, for this supposition seemed reasonable.

The cowboys by this time were gathered around the two, and Talbot called upon them for their opinions.

They were all men of experience, well qualified to express an opinion upon a matter of this kind, and after carefully examining the lay of the ground they declared it was their belief that the brigands had really abandoned the valley.

"Well, we will go on that idea and make an advance!" Talbot declared. "If the fellows have laid a trap for us, I reckon we will be able to hold our own, for it will be a hand-to-hand fight and the ground affords them no advantage."

Weapons were carefully examined, and then the party advanced.

No foe, though, was there to receive them; the camp was indeed deserted.

Then an attempt was made to follow on the trail of the outlaws, but the heavy rain had obliterated the tracks so that even Mud Turtle was at fault.

The expedition was a failure, and, reluctantly, the party proceeded to retrace their steps.

"For the present this scoundrel has escaped me!" Talbot exclaimed. "But it is a long lane which has no turning, and before many days I will be on the trail of this Bernal again!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BRIGAND'S LETTER.

THE expedition was careful to return with as much caution as they had set out, for even though Talbot had been baffled in his attempt to surprise the brigands, he did not deem it wise to allow the scoundrels to know that he had been on their track.

"They will not be able to keep quiet long," he observed to Mud Turtle, "and I will be able to get on the trail soon. Then, too, no doubt, I shall speedily hear from them in regard to the ransom of my wife, and although the scoundrel will, of course, do all in his power to cover up his tracks when he sets out to put himself in communication with me, yet, in spite of all his precautions, I may be able to get a clew to his whereabouts."

The Indian remarked that he thought this was probable.

"He will send a messenger to me, and when the man departs you can track him, and unless the fellow is as cunning as a fox and doubles on his trail like one, you will be apt to discover where the brigands have their lair."

To this the Indian agreed, and he remarked in his terse way that, if he once got on the right track, the brigand's agent would have to be more cunning than any Mexican he had ever encountered to be able to shake him off.

Before the party dispersed, Talbot arranged a means of communication so that the force could be got together again at short notice, and then, after the "army" separated, and Talbot and the Indian rode toward the ranch of the former, the sport devised a scheme by means of which the red-skin was to be warned when the brigand's messenger appeared and made known his errand.

But the reputation which the Mexican bandit had acquired for being as cunning as a fox was not undeserved, as events proved.

Two days Talbot waited in anxious expectation of hearing from the outlaw chief, but no message came; but on the morning of the third Talbot was roused from his slumbers by one of the herdsmen, who brought him a letter which the man said he had found fastened by a tack to the gate, upon the outside, when he had opened it that morning.

It was addressed to "Richard Talbot, Esquire," in a good, round, English hand.

The moment it was delivered to him and the account given of how it had been discovered, Talbot immediately suspected that it came from the Mexican outlaw.

That the address was written in a good English hand was not surprising, for Fernando

Bernal was known to be a man of education, and able to converse and write as fluently and correctly in English as in his own native tongue.

Talbot took the letter and dismissed the herdsman without betraying any surprise, just as if it was a common thing for his mail to be tacked to his outer gates.

When the man was gone, Talbot summoned Mud Turtle, whose apartment was near at hand.

When Talbot explained in regard to the letter, the Indian shook his head.

"On that Mexican no flies," he remarked, with the air of a sage.

"You are right, the fellow is about as smart as they make them, but he will have to be smarter than I think he is if he opens communication with me and succeeds in arranging the matter so that I cannot get on his trail," Talbot declared, as he opened the letter.

It was from the Mexican outlaw, as he had suspected; his first glance was at the signature, and there, in bold characters, was traced the name of the brigand chief, Fernando Bernal.

The letter ran as follows, and Talbot read it aloud for Mud Turtle's benefit:

"MY DEAR MR. TALBOT:—

"Circumstances over which I have no control oblige me to throw myself upon your generosity. I am desperately in want of money, and as I know you have plenty I am certain you will not object to sharing some of your vast wealth with me. I need about twenty thousand dollars in cash, and as I do not suppose you are in the habit of keeping so large a sum about you, I have made arrangements so I can get along for a month, which will afford you ample time to secure the funds.

"Your lovely and accomplished wife is my guest at present, and I assure you I am so impressed with her beauty and worth that I am strongly tempted to keep her with me altogether, but if you are so generous as to give me the twenty thousand in cash, of course I could not be hard-hearted enough to deprive you of such a charming companion.

"I trust you will keep this little matter quiet. I am a proud man, and though I am in want of money it would give me great pain to have my condition known to the world at large.

"I should be pleased to have you visit me with all the friends you can muster, but at present having just finished entertaining a regiment of Mexican troops—my countrymen and dear friends—I am not prepared to receive other visitors, but should you come, notwithstanding this warning, you can depend upon receiving an exceedingly warm reception.

"At present your lovely and amiable wife is being treated like a queen, and until I hear from you in relation to this matter, you can rest assured that nothing will be left undone to make her comfortable, but if you should so far forget the politeness, which ought to be part of every gentleman's character, as to treat this humble demand with contempt, then, in my despair, I might be tempted to do something rash.

"But you will not do this—I am confident that you, noble American, will only be too glad to oblige me with this small sum, which to a man of your wealth is but a flea-bite.

"As I mentioned, at present I am denying myself to visitors, so I will not be able to see you in person, but in the town of Cobota lives an honest tradesman, Aaron Mosenstein by name, and through him the negotiation can be conducted.

"Receive then the assurance of my distinguished consideration, and believe me yours to command,

"(Signed) FERNANDO BERNAL."

"What do you think of that for a document?" Talbot asked, when he came to the end of the letter.

"Too much blow," replied the chief. "Why not say: 'Got squaw—you want her, antetwenty thousand—all down but nine?'"

"Oh, no, that would not do at all. A communication like that, terse and to the point, would never suit these Mexicans, who delight in long-winded and flowery gabble."

"Bosh!" Mud Turtle declared.

"That is about the English of it," Talbot remarked. "But now, to come down to business, this fellow is using a go-between so as to cover up his trail; to judge by the name, the Cobota man is a Jew, and although in my time I have met with a great many Jews who were every bit as good as any Gentiles that I ever ran across yet as a rule, these gentle Jews don't flourish in a climate like this, so I am probably safe in setting down this Aaron Mosenstein for a cunning rascal."

Mud Turtle nodded, showing that he agreed with his pard.

"It is the brigand's idea that by using this Mosenstein as a go-between he will be able to prevent me from getting at him," Talbot remarked, "but as he will have to communicate with Bernal, or Bernal with him, I reckon I will have some chance for my white ally in this game."

"You bet!" exclaimed the red-skin, in deep, guttural accents.

"The first thing to be done is to visit Cobota and see what this Aaron Mosenstein is like, and learn what he has to say for himself."

Again the Indian nodded.

"I do not know anything about the town of Cobota, but I suppose it does not differ materially from the usual Mexican hamlet," Talbot observed, reflectively.

"Now, let me see about the best way to work this game."

"You are pretty well-known in this neighbor-

hood, but the chances are big against any one in Cobota knowing anything about you.

"Arivaca and Alter only towns know Mud Turtle," the chief observed.

"Yes, the odds are big that no one in Cobota knows that you are connected with my ranch, but in order to make sure of the matter you must dress yourself like a peon, and make out that you are one of these tame Indians in search of a job as a herdsman."

"Me fool 'um, you bet!" the chief declared.

"It would be a good idea for you to tackle the mescal shop as soon as you strike the town, and pretend to get full; then you can lay around without anybody suspecting that you are playing the spy."

"Me do it."

"From the fact of the brigand selecting this town to do business in, I suspect that he has a good many friends in the neighborhood, and if we go on that idea we will not be likely to make any mistake. You have got so that you can jabber Spanish pretty well, and although you are a good deal bigger than the average peon, yet by using extra care the chances are big that your disguise will not be penetrated."

"Me play 'possum," the chief observed.

"Well, you had better set out at once, and I will ride over this afternoon," Talbot observed.

"This fellow will have his spies on the watch, of course, and if we make our appearance in the town anywhere near the same time, some suspicion might be excited."

Mud Turtle agreed to this, and after arrangements were made for holding secret communication, the red-skin departed.

Talbot had no fear that Mud Turtle would not play his part to perfection, for better than any man in the world he knew how cunning was the red chief, wise as the fox and as brave as the lion—a man who, whether in council, on the trail, or in the red heat of battle, would not be apt to find a superior in all the vast Western wilderness.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN COBOTA.

WHEN the noonday sun reached its meridian, it shone upon the figure of Richard Talbot, riding swiftly toward the Mexican hamlet.

No incident occurred on the journey, and in due time he rode into the town.

As he had anticipated, it was a small village, not over a hundred inhabitants all told.

No need for Talbot to inquire in regard to the whereabouts of the man he sought, for the most imposing building in the place was a small store, which on a rude sign, affixed to the front, displayed the name of Aaron Mosenstein.

Opposite to the store was the "mescal shop," as Dick Talbot had termed it, the drinking-saloon where the fiery beverages so dear to the heart of the average Mexican could be obtained.

Through the open door Dick Talbot got a view of the interior as he rode by, and within was Mud Turtle, so completely disguised by the dress he had assumed that Talbot had to take a second glance to be sure that it was the red chief, in company with two other peons and a low-browed, ruffianly-looking Mexican, all of whom seemed to be well under the influence of the potent liquor which they had freely imbibed.

"Mud Turtle is going to make the raffle easily enough," Talbot muttered, as he rode up to the store. "The man who succeeds in getting the best of the red chief in a game of this kind will have to get up extremely early in the morning."

The sharp dismounted, tied his horse to one of the posts in the street before the house, and then entered the store.

The only person visible within was a thin-faced, sharp-eyed lad of sixteen or thereabouts, whose features plainly revealed that he was a descendant of the "chosen people," a son of Israel.

Talbot nodded to the boy, who came forward to wait upon him.

"Aaron Mosenstein?" he asked.

"He ish in der back room, sir," responded the youth, speaking with a strong Jewish accent.

"Can I see him?"

"Certainly, mine goot sir; I vill call him."

And this the youth proceeded to do, and the proprietor of the place made his appearance immediately.

He was a short, fat man, with bushy red hair and a beard of the same hue; his eyes were small, pig-like in their appearance, and his nose was enormous in size.

The man had a greasy look, and as he came forward, rubbing his hands together, smirking as though he was delighted beyond measure to behold Talbot, that gentleman, a wonderfully good judge of character, set him down as a sharper of the first degree.

"Goot-evening—goot-evening, my tear sir! v'at can I do for you, my fr'ent, dis evening?" he asked, in soft accents, which reminded one strongly of the purring of a pleased cat.

In the South it is customary to call afternoon evening.

"Mr. Aaron Mosenstein?" asked Talbot.

"Yesh, mine tear fr'ent, dot ish mine name, and I am glat to meet mit you," the Jew replied, with an extremely servile bow.

"I have come to see you on a little matter of business."

"Yesh, mine fr'ent—dot ish goot. I vill deal as vell mit you as any man dot you can find in Sonora?" the Jew declared.

"My name is Talbot—Richard Talbot, of Arivaca."

It was the sharp's idea that the moment he revealed who he was the Jew would understand the nature of the business upon which he came; but to his surprise the storekeeper did not seem to recognize his name; he merely nodded, grinned, and again expressed the pleasure it gave him to make the acquaintance of his "goot fr'ent."

"As my business is important I should like to have an opportunity to speak to you in private in regard to it."

"Certainly, my tear sir! if you vill hafe the kindness to walk dis vay we can speak mitout danger of anybody overhearing v'at we say."

Then the Jew led the way to his private apartment.

After the fashion common to storekeepers in the wild frontier region he had a living-room fitted up in the back of his store.

The Hebrew hastened to place a chair for his visitor and then closed the door.

"Now, mine fr'ent, we are as private as can be," the Jew declared.

Then he produced a bottle and a glass and invited his guest to take a drink, a bit of hospitality which few tradesmen in the wild regions of the Southwest neglect.

But to Mosenstein's surprise Talbot begged to be excused, saying that he seldom drank anything.

"Ah, Mister Talbot, it would not cost me so much to do business if all mans were like you, mine fr'ent!" the Jew declared, as he replaced the bottle and glass.

"I presume you understand the nature of the business upon which I come?" Talbot remarked.

The Jew looked surprised.

"Eh, v'at is dot?" he exclaimed.

Talbot repeated the remark.

"Vell, I suppose you wants to buy something mit me," the Jew remarked. "Und I assure you, mine goot sir, there is no shop in Mexico where you will be better treated. I am der honestest mans dot you vill find in der province."

"I come in relation to my wife."

"Your wife!" exclaimed Mosenstein, with a look of great surprise.

"Yes; I have been informed that you were prepared to negotiate in regard to her."

"Mine gootness! v'at ish dat you say?" exclaimed the Hebrew. "Your wife! why, mine fr'ent, I know nothing about your wife—how should I? You are a stranger to me, so help me Isaac! I did not know whether you had a wife or not."

Talbot was puzzled by the declaration and was at a loss to know what to make of this strange affair.

Why on earth did the brigand direct him to come to the Jew if the man knew nothing about the matter?

"This certainly is very strange," Talbot observed, and then he related to Mosenstein how his wife had been abducted by the brigand, and told of the letter which he had received instructing him to call upon Mosenstein.

"Hafe you dot letter?" the Jew asked with a wise look.

Talbot gave it to Mosenstein.

The shopkeeper read it very carefully and then handed it back to Talbot.

"Upon my word as an honest mans, I do not know v'at to make of dis matter!" he declared, with a solemn shake of the head.

"I hafe heard of dis mans of course; everybody in dis section has heard of him, and many of them to their sorrow, but he has never troubled me, nor hafe I had any dealing mit him in any way, und why he should direct you to come to me is more than I know."

At this point there was a knock at the door, and when Mosenstein said "enter," the Jewish lad made his appearance with a letter, which he informed his employer a horseman had just left for him.

"Is that man mitout?" the Jew asked.

"No, sir; he rode up to the door, beckoned me to come out, gave me the letter, and said it vas for you, then rode away," the lad answered.

"Vell, I s'pose dot ish all right," said the Jew.

The youth withdrew.

Mosenstein opened the letter, glanced at the signature, and then gave a start of surprise.

"Mine gootness, mine fr'ent, dis ish from der brigand!" he exclaimed.

"Well, do you know I had a suspicion that it might be when your young man described how it had been delivered to him," Talbot remarked, quietly.

The sharp was too old a player not to have suspected the game by this time.

The ignorance of the Jew, and the arrival of the letter was a cunning trick, to make it appear as if Mosenstein had no connection with the brigand.

"Mine gootness! v'at a strange world dis ish!" the Jew exclaimed, after he had finished the perusal of the letter. "Shust see, mine fr'ent!" Mosenstein handed the letter to Talbot and he read it aloud.

It was as follows:

"MY DEAR MOSENSTEIN:—

"Knowing you to be a strictly honest man I have resolved to intrust a little business matter to your hands. The wife of Richard Talbot, the Ranch King of Arivaca, is at present a guest at my hacienda. I have notified Mr. Talbot that upon the payment of twenty thousand dollars I will be glad to return the lady to his care, and instructed him to see you in regard to the matter.

"As I said at the beginning, it is because I have perfect faith in your honesty that I allow you to negotiate this delicate matter. I feel sure that you will act fairly both with Mr. Talbot and myself.

"You will not be compromised by attending to this matter, and if you succeed in bringing the affair to a favorable conclusion I will give you five hundred dollars for your pains.

"If Mr. Talbot calls upon you, and is willing to negotiate, display a plain, white envelope in the center pane of your right-hand window; in due time my agent will call upon you and explain how I wish the matter arranged. Yours truly,

"(Signed)

FERNANDO BERNAL."

"Ish not dis a strange thing, mine goot fr'ent?" the Jew exclaimed, as Talbot handed back the letter.

"Yes, it is rather odd."

"Five hundred tollars! mine gootness! dot ish a big lot of money."

"Right you are!" responded Talbot. "And you would not be wise if you did not jump at the chance to collar it."

"You t'ink I should go into it?"

"Most decidedly."

"Und men say dot dis Bernal is square und always lives up to his word."

"Yes, so I have heard, and he evidently has confidence in you too, for if you choose, you, with my aid, could easily arrange a trap so that this brigand could be captured, and the Governor of Sonora would pay a big price for Fernando Bernal, alive or dead."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE INDIAN ON THE TRAIL.

THE Jew shook his head most vigorously in dissent.

"Oh, no, oh, mine gootness, no!" he cried. "I would not try for to do such a t'ing as dot for all der monish in der world!"

"You would not care to risk it, eh?" Talbot observed with a quiet smile.

He had no idea when he spoke that he could get the Jew to go into any scheme of the kind, and had only made the suggestion for the purpose of seeing what the Hebrew would say.

"Mine goot fr'ent, I would not do anything to make dot Bernal mad mit me for all der money dot dere is in der world!" the Jew exclaimed.

"All the money in the world is a great deal," Talbot observed.

"V'at goot would it do me if I vash not alive to enjoy it?" Mosenstein asked.

"That is very true, but if the scheme was successful, and the brigand was in the hands of the Mexican authorities, there would not be much danger of his roubling you," Talbot suggested.

"Ah, yesh, yesh, but then some of der band would take up der matter," the Jew responded, with a wise shake of the head.

"Oh, no, I am not such a donkey as to undertake to fight mit a mans like Bernal. Besides, he is too big a fox to be caught in a trap.

"If you are wise, mine goot fr'ent, you will not attempt to play any trick mit Bernal."

"But the sum that he demands is altogether too large; it is not possible for me to raise twenty thousand dollars."

"Is dot so?"

"Yes, that is the truth."

"Mine gootness, I had an idea dot it would not trouble you in der least—a mans like you dot ish called der Ranch King."

"Yes, I know that my neighbors have an impression that I am rolling in wealth, but for all that I cannot raise twenty thousand dollars at present in hard cash. I am worth a good bit of money, but it is invested, and I cannot command the use of my capital at a few weeks' notice—so I suppose there will not be any need of my going into the matter. All I can do will be to wait for the Governor of Sonora to capture Bernal."

"Ah, mine fr'ent, I am afraid dot if you wait for dot, you will have to wait a long time!" the Jew declared. "Dot thing has been tried so many times, und never yet has der governor succeeded in putting salt on der tail of der bird."

"I don't see what else I can do, for I cannot raise the twenty thousand."

"Maybe he will be willing to take less," the Jew suggested.

"Do you think there is any chance of that?"

"I should not be surprised," Mosenstein responded. "Of course, all I know of dis mans is v'at I have heard, but all der accounts say dot

he is a pretty goot feller, und dot he always tries to make everything as pleasant as can be, und mine gootness! if you cannot raise twenty thousand tollars, v'at ish der use of his holding out for dot sum?"

"That is very true, if he will only look at the matter in that light?"

"Und why should he not?" the Jew asked. "Dot would be der sensible way. A man cannot gife v'at he has not got."

"Not very well."

"Dot ish der point! Bernal ish no fool, und you can bet yer boots dot he will see it."

"Well, I hope so."

"I will try and arrange it so dot I can see him," and the Jew nodded, while a cunning look appeared upon his face. "I vill say to him, dot Mister Talbot ish a fr'ent of mine, he ish a goot, square man—he vill do v'at he can, but from a stone you cannot get blood; if a man has not twenty thousand tollars he cannot gife it to you."

"Not much doubt about that."

"Then he will probably say to me, 'How mooch can Mister Talbot gife?' and the Jew fixed his cunning eyes on the rancher's face. "How ish dot?" he asked.

"Well, I reckon by hard pushing that I might be able to scare up ten thousand," Talbot remarked, slowly.

"Vell, vell, dot ish not so bad!" the Jew exclaimed.

"No, I should say not; ten thousand dollars is a goodly sum of money and it does not grow on every bush."

"Dot ish goot! dot ish der best t'ing I have heard for a long time!" Mosenstein exclaimed.

"I vill tell dot to Bernal; I vill say to him dose words, 'ten thousand tollars does not grow on every bush,' und if you are wise you vill grab dis money so quick as never vas."

"You think the matter can be arranged, then?"

"Oh, yesh; I do not t'ink dere ish a doubt about it."

"How soon will you be apt to know anything certain?"

"Ah, mine goot fr'ent, do you not know as mooch about dot, as I do?" the Jew exclaimed.

"I cannot tell; I vill put der signal in der window. To-morrow I may get word—maybe not for a week, but when I do, I send for you right away."

"All right," and Talbot rose to depart. "I will wait at my ranch until I hear from you."

"Yesh, mine goot sir, dot ish de way to do. You can bet yer boots I will send pretty quick as soon as I know anything certain!"

Then Mosenstein shook hands with the rancher with as much warmth as though he was the oldest and dearest friend he had in the world, again pressed him to have a drink, and expressed his sorrow when Talbot declined, then escorted him to the street.

Talbot mounted his horse and rode away, perfectly satisfied that he understood the game as well as though he had planned it himself.

The Jew affected to be ignorant of all knowledge of the bandit, so that if the authorities took it into their heads to look into the matter no blame could be attached to him.

There was no harm, of course, in his acting as the agent of Talbot and endeavoring to arrange the matter.

The rancher rode slowly out of the Mexican hamlet, pondering deeply upon the subject.

"Upon my word," he murmured, "this Fernando Bernal is a smarter rascal than I thought; he certainly has managed this affair in a masterly manner, but smart as he is I reckon that I will be able to match him."

"There isn't any doubt that he and the Jew understand each other well enough, and that if Mosenstein chose he could open communication with Bernal in a few hours. The envelope in the window is merely a dodge to throw me off the track, to keep me from jumping to the conclusion that the Jew and the brigand are pards working together in this matter."

"It was a lucky thought to have Mud Turtle here in disguise, and smart as the brigand is, I doubt whether he will be up to that dodge."

"Bernal and the Jew are in communication, and whether the brigand comes to the Jew or Mosenstein goes to the bandit, Mud Turtle will be on the watch, and the pair will have to be wonderfully smart to fool the Indian."

"If all goes well, Mud Turtle will undoubtedly discover where the outlaws have their lair, and then, with the aid of the cowboys, I may be able to show this Bernal a trick which will not be at all to his liking."

As the reader will perceive from these reflections, Talbot was easy in his mind as he proceeded on his homeward road.

Mud Turtle, in the mescal shop, was playing his part to perfection.

With the recklessness of the drunkard he had squandered the five Mexican dollars which he had brought with him into the town—his sole wealth, as he had asserted, and then, pretending to be completely overcome by the strength of the fiery liquor which he had imbibed so freely, the red chief made his slow and uncertain way from the saloon, and selecting a sheltered nook in a shed directly opposite Mosenstein's

store, stretched himself on the ground and, apparently, went fast asleep.

Of course, as the reader has doubtless suspected, the red chief was playing 'possum.

Men who knew Mud Turtle well had often declared that the brawny chief had a head of iron and a throat and stomach lined with copper, for otherwise he could never stand the potent liquor which at times he drank so freely.

One thing was certain—no one had ever seen the red-skin in such a condition that it could be asserted that he had drank more liquor than was good for him; he seemed to be proof against the power of alcohol, and therefore on this occasion, although the fiery Mexican beverages completely prostrated his companions, yet Mud Turtle was in full possession of all his senses, although no one who saw him reel out of the drinking-place and make his way to the shed-corner where he curled himself up dog fashion to enjoy a nap would have suspected it.

And though Mud Turtle appeared to be plunged in the deepest kind of slumber, yet all the time he had one eye open, as the saying goes, and kept vigilant watch upon the store of the Jew.

In about an hour the untiring vigil of the red chief was rewarded.

Mosenstein came from the store, went to the shed directly in the rear of the store where his horse was kept, saddled and bridled the animal, mounted and departed, taking the western road which led to the old Mexican town of Quitovaquita.

Five minutes after the Jew's departure Mud Turtle pretended to awake.

He arose, stretched himself, drew his ragged *serape* around him and ambled off in a northern direction, taking the same road by which he had entered the town.

After getting beyond the houses Mud Turtle turned to the left and proceeded in a western direction, just as Mosenstein had done.

Over the wide, open prairie at a rapid pace went the Indian, loping along with the tireless stride of the red-man, and, as he had calculated, within ten minutes he caught sight of the Jew galloping away in the distance.

Mud Turtle came upon his game rather sooner than he had expected, for although Mosenstein was not a good rider, yet his steed was a fine beast and carried him along at a good rate of speed.

But the Jew, after getting out of sight of the town, had turned abruptly to the north and was now making straight for the American line.

"Hawks of Cababi!" muttered the Indian, when he made this discovery, the title of the outlaws coming to his mind. "In Cababi Mountains mebbe, who knows?"

And, stanch as the hound on the scent, he followed on the trail.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SNAKE.

AND now we must turn our attention to a couple of our characters whom we have neglected too long; we refer to the Englishman, Reginald Broughton, who had come so far on his peculiar mission, and the gambler, Curly Kid.

As the reader will remember, after the two had failed so signally in their attempt to assassinate Dick Talbot, they had made up their minds that in the future they would not expose themselves to the chance of being killed by that able fighter, but would hire a bravo to do the work.

Curly Kid, being well acquainted with all the disreputable characters who made the mining-camp their stamping-ground, had no difficulty, as the reader will recollect, in fixing upon a likely man to do the work.

The two took advantage of the shades of night to seek the bravo.

The gambler had not exaggerated when he said that Lope Escato, the Mexican desperado, commonly known as the Snake, was as ugly a customer as could be found in the district. He was a terror, and few men were there in the mining-camp who cared to brave his wrath.

Since his advent in the town he had been in as many fights as he had fingers and toes, and, being quick as a cat, although he was a good-sized, muscular fellow, also expert with his weapons, had succeeded in getting the best of all his antagonists.

So, as always happens in a case of this kind, after the Snake acquired a reputation for being a terror, men generally gave him a wide berth.

The pair had no difficulty in finding the desperado for he had his headquarters at a low saloon, kept by a Mexican, and which was called the Hotel de Sonora.

From the rather lofty-sounding name one would be apt to imagine that the place amounted to something; but it did not, being one of the meanest "dives" in the camp.

To the Hotel de Sonora went the conspirators, and there, as they had expected, they found the man they sought.

It was early in the evening when the gambler and the Englishman entered the saloon, and there were few people in the place.

The Snake sat in a corner at the end of the bar, puffing away at a cigarette in true Mexican

style, a prey to melancholy, for affairs were not progressing favorably with him.

The gambler greeted the desperado and invited him to have a drink, an invitation which Escato gladly accepted, and as he joined the pair at the bar, the Englishman got a good look at him.

The Snake was a man of thirty or thereabouts, a muscular, well-built fellow, with a dark, ugly-looking face.

He was well dressed, wearing the Mexican garb, for he affected to be something of a dandy in his attire.

Curly Kid introduced the Englishman, who expressed his pleasure at meeting a man of whom he had heard so much, and the desperado bowed with true Spanish politeness, his vanity pleased by the compliment.

After the refreshments were dispatched, the gambler inquired of Escato how he was getting on.

"Oh, saints in heaven! I am not getting on at all," the Snake cried.

"Is it possible?" Curly Kid asked.

"It is as true as that I stand here a living man at this moment," the Mexican replied, bringing his hand down upon the counter with a bang to emphasize the words.

"How comes it?" the gambler asked. "A man of ability like yourself ought always to be at the top of the heap."

"Ah, well; luck has run dead against me for the last month," the desperado explained. "Never since this world began has a man had a worse run of luck than I have had during that time. If I bet a card would win, it was sure to lose, and then, when in my despair I copped that self-same card to lose, *caramba!* it would come up a winner every time."

"Oh, that is always the way," Curly Kid observed. "I have seen it work in that fashion a thousand times. When a man strikes a streak of bad luck the best thing he can do is to stop playing. It is no use to try to buck against it. The harder you try, the worse it will be for you. That is gambler's philosophy, you know."

"Bah! I fight fate itself!" the desperado exclaimed, throwing back his head proudly.

"That is plucky, of course," the Englishman remarked; "but then it does not always pay, you know."

"That is a fact, and I tell you, Escato, it is no use to fight luck when it is dead against you," Curly Kid asserted. "But as you have had so long a run of it the chances are big that your luck will soon turn."

"Yes; if it doesn't, I shall have to turn road-agent, or, maybe, go join Fernando Bernal and his brigands."

"Oh, a man like yourself, Escato, would not be content to serve under anybody else," the gambler remarked.

"That is true enough," the desperado replied, with an air of lofty dignity. "I have been my own master so long that it would be a hard matter for me to submit to the will of another, even though it was so good a man as Fernando Bernal."

"I shall have to set up in business for myself—have to find some man who has a foe for whom he is no match, and I will volunteer for a fair sum to take the quarrel upon myself."

"Well, well! of all the odd things!" the gambler cried.

"How odd—what do you mean?" Escato asked.

"Why, my friend here is fixed that way exactly," Curly Kid replied.

"Is it possible?"

"Yes; there is a certain man in this district with whom my friend has had trouble, and in the fight that followed he got the worst of it, being no match for his man," the gambler explained.

The desperado caught eagerly at the chance.

"Let him confide the business to me, and if I do not settle the man I will not ask a copper coin for the trouble!" the Snake exclaimed.

This conversation had taken place at one end of the counter while the bartender was busy at the other, and now Curly Kid nodded toward him and said:

"This is too public a place to discuss an important matter like this; had we not better seek some spot where we can talk the matter over in private, and where there will not be any danger of our being overheard?"

"Yes, the idea is a good one; in an affair of this kind a man cannot be too careful," the desperado remarked.

"Come to my room; we can converse there without danger of being overheard."

The others agreed to this, and Escato conducted the pair to his apartment, which was a small room on the second floor of the Hotel de Sonora.

The Mexican lit a candle and invited the pair to be seated.

The furniture of the apartment was limited, consisting only of a small camp cot and a single stool.

The Englishman was given the stool while the other two sat on the bed, the candle being placed in a tin fixture, fastened to the wall.

"At present I am the only lodger, so there is

no danger of any one playing the spy upon us," the Mexican remarked, after the party were seated.

"It is always my rule in a case of this kind to adopt all possible precaution," the gambler observed.

"You are wise so to do," Escato assented. "If a man is warned, and on his guard, it is often a difficult matter to get at him, particularly if he happens to be a good fighter."

"This man is no slouch," Curly Kid remarked.

"What is his name?" the Snake asked.

"Dick Talbot; he has a place near Arivaca and is called the Ranch King."

"Ah, yes, I know the man," the desperado remarked. "I have seen him in the camp half a dozen times; I think I saw him ride away this morning."

"Yes, he did leave the camp to return to his ranch," the gambler remarked.

"This Talbot is a good man I should judge from his looks, although I never heard of him getting into any difficulties."

"He and my friend here had a tussle," Curly Kid explained. "And he got so much the best of it, and so easily that my friend is satisfied that he stands no chance with him."

"But he is anxious for revenge all the same, eh?" asked the desperado with a grim smile.

"Yes, and he will not be satisfied until this Ranch King is made to bite the dust," the gambler replied.

"I will undertake the job, and you can rest assured that I will not fail to settle him!" the desperado remarked, speaking as lightly and with as much unconcern as though it was a common, every-day matter to arrange for the killing of a fellow-being.

"Let me consider the matter for a moment," continued the Snake. "Is it likely that this Talbot will soon return to the camp?"

"No, I do not think it is," Curly Kid replied.

"Quite unlikely, I should say," the Englishman added.

"In that case then I shall have to seek him at his ranch, unless he can be decoyed to the camp again," Escato remarked.

"Possibly that might be arranged," Curly Kid observed.

"It would have to be managed extremely carefully," the Englishman suggested. "This Talbot is no fool, and if there was anything at all suspicious about the matter he would be sure to detect it, and then all the fat would be in the fire."

"My way of striking a man is to strike him so quickly that he never expects the blow," the desperado declared. "I will not attempt to lure Talbot here, but will seek him at his ranch, and you may rest assured I will find some good opportunity to do my work."

"Now, then, in regard to the pay: I shall want a good price, for it is worth something to kill a man like this Ranch King."

"Name your figure," said the gambler, "and if it isn't too high we will close the bargain."

"Two hundred dollars; fifty in advance, and the rest when the man is dead. Mind you, I am risking my life."

"I am content!" exclaimed the Englishman, and he counted out the fifty.

Exultantly the desperado clutched the money. "Oh! that is the way to do business," he cried. "Never fear, I will finish your man for you."

And so the compact for the death of bold Injun Dick was made.

CHAPTER XXV.

BERNAL AND HIS CAPTIVE.

AND now there is another character—an extremely important one, too, in regard to whose whereabouts the reader no doubt is wondering.

We refer to Mrs. Talbot, the beautiful and dauntless Frisco Nell of other days.

When she found that she was helpless in the power of the Mexican bandit she resolved to make the best of the situation.

She was well aware that there was no immediate danger.

It was the intention of the brigand to hold her for a heavy ransom, and she felt sure she would be well treated as long as the outlaw thought there was a chance of his making a good round sum out of her.

So she submitted to her fate without a murmur.

After leaving the ranch the brigands rode for the head-waters of the North Fork of the Alter, leaving behind them the trail which Mud Turtle had found so little difficulty in following.

But when the party arrived at the brigand camp in the valley, part of the force only baited there; Fernando Bernal, with ten of the band, kept on through the valley, followed the stream until it left the foot-hills and cut its way through the rolling prairie; then the riders bent abruptly to the westward, following a small trail which led them to a lonely ranch up in the hills, and in a securely guarded apartment in this ranch Mrs. Talbot was placed.

Two brawny half-breed women were instructed by the outlaw chief to look after the captive, and in addition to the women a couple of men were detailed to guard the ranch.

"For the present I will have to bid you adieu," the brigand chieftain said, after the prisoner had been delivered to her jailers. "I have some important business to which I must give my personal attention, but after I attend to it, I will take great pleasure in waiting upon you."

"You have no cause to be alarmed, for no danger threatens you," he continued. "Fernando Bernal does not make war upon women, although sometimes I am compelled to ask them to accept the hospitalities of my mansion while their husbands, fathers or brothers gather their wealth, but I can assure you that no harm has ever befallen any of the fair creatures yet."

"Oh, I am not at all alarmed, sir," the prisoner replied, perfectly cool and placid.

"So I perceive, and I am glad that you are disposed to be reasonable," the outlaw remarked, with an approving nod. "It saves a deal of trouble."

"I presume you understand that there is no chance for you to leave this ranch until I will for you to do so, and I hope that you will be sensible enough not to attempt to make any trouble."

"I shall try to be agreeable, sir," the captive answered, and if Bernal noticed that the remark was rather evasive, he took no notice of it.

"I am glad to receive the assurance," and then, with an extremely polite bow, the bandit chief departed.

Hope had sprung up in the heart of the captive when she found that she was to be left to the care of the two half-breed women, for although they were really horrible-looking creatures, ugly and repulsive, yet Mrs. Talbot knew from long experience that few of the half-breeds, male or female, could be trusted, and she hoped to be able to bribe one of the pair to set her at liberty.

She resolved to proceed slowly and cautiously, though, so as to be sure of her ground before she made a movement.

For a whole day then she attentively studied the two, anxious to see on which one an impression would be most likely to be produced.

But the more she studied the two the more doubtful she became in regard to the matter, for two more hardened specimens of humanity she had never encountered.

Carefully, and with the utmost adroitness, she took advantage of being left alone first with one and then with the other to sound them both, but she only had her labor for her pains, for upon neither one of the dusky dames could she make the slightest impression.

To her hints that her husband would pay a large sum to any one who would aid her to escape from her present uncomfortable position, they merely shrugged their shoulders and replied that any one who knew the power of the brigand chief would not be apt to brave it for all the money in the world, for Bernal would be sure to kill any of his band who attempted any treachery.

The captive endeavored to persuade the women that by a speedy flight from that section of the country, the vengeance of the outlaw might be avoided, but they shook their heads and declared that the arms of the brigand were so long that he would be able to reach the traitors, no matter where they might take refuge.

At last the prisoner gave up the attempt in despair, for she saw that it was not possible to make the slightest impression upon either one of the pair.

The fear that they had of the wrath of Fernando Bernal was greater than their desire for gold.

Then the captive set her wits to work to see if she could not devise some way to escape from her prison house without the assistance of the women.

For two days she schemed, racking her brains until her head ached, and all to no purpose, for she was so closely guarded that there was no possible chance for her to escape.

"I am helpless," she murmured; "the cage is too strong—too cunningly contrived for me to hope to escape from it. All I can do is to possess my soul with patience and wait. My lion-hearted husband will surely rescue me if it be in the power of man to accomplish the feat."

On the third day one of the Mexicans brought word that Captain Bernal would be pleased to wait upon her if she would have the kindness to receive him.

Under the circumstances such a message seemed to be the sheerest mockery, and the captive had great difficulty to refrain from sending the reply that if he waited until she was willing to receive him, the probabilities were great that he never would be gratified by an interview.

She restrained herself from acting upon the impulse, though, and said, quietly:

"If Captain Bernal wishes to see me, I am sure I cannot prevent him."

The Mexican did not think that this was a proper reply to make to the polite request of the outlaw chief, and when he delivered it he took the liberty of twisting it around so that

the brigand was given to understand that the prisoner was delighted at the honor conferred upon her.

The Mexicans are nothing if not flowery.

The idea that the man had altered the message in any way never entered the mind of the brigand, and he fell into the error of thinking that the lady desired to conciliate him.

So he was in the best of humors when he made his appearance before her.

He removed his hat as he entered and made an elaborate bow.

The brigand chief now appeared in his own proper person, having discarded the false beard and long-haired wig.

Mrs. Talbot surveyed him with a look of surprise, for his appearance was so changed by the abandonment of the disguise that she did not recognize him.

When arrayed in the false beard and wig, Bernal had the appearance of a ferocious, middle-aged ruffian, although in reality he was a man under thirty, and as good-looking and dashing a cavalier as could be found in all the Mexican land.

The brigand noted the look of amazement upon the face of the lady and guessed immediately as to the cause.

"You find me somewhat changed?" he said, with a pleasant smile.

"Yes, I do."

"In my other guise I do not doubt that I appeared to be as ferocious a ruffian as ever scuttled a ship or cut a throat."

"Your appearance was certainly not in your favor."

"It is a trick of my trade," the brigand leader explained. "I am the leader of the Hawks of Cababi; the most bloodthirsty and unscrupulous band of marauders that ever infested the province of Sonora—if the Mexican authorities are to be believed; the public at large naturally would imagine the leader of such a band to be a man whose countenance alone would strike terror to the hearts of all who beheld it, and I flatter myself that when I have my wig and beard on, I am about as ugly a looking dog as the eyes of mortals ever saw."

"That is surely the truth," Mrs. Talbot observed.

"Yes, it is my game to inspire terror by my appearance," the outlaw chief remarked.

"And then, too, there is another reason. By always wearing a disguise when on a raid, which completely conceals my real appearance, I am able to go in my own proper person where list without any danger of my being discovered by the parties whom I have visited in the way of business."

"As you can doubtless guess from my appearance, I am fond of society and enjoy having a good time. The life of a misanthrope would not suit me at all, and although circumstances have made me an outcast, and it is no longer possible for me to mingle with my fellow-men under my own name, yet, thanks to the precautions I have adopted, as Fernando Bernal is associated with a long-haired, huge-bearded ruffian, I am able to freely move in my own proper person among the men, who would speedily string me up to the nearest tree, or riddle my body with bullets, if they had any idea of who I really was."

"It is a wise precaution," the captive remarked, perceiving that the brigand expected her to say something.

"Yes, and so far my scheme has worked to a charm," Bernal observed, complacently.

"I mingle, without arousing suspicion, among men who have every reason in the world to hate me, and they never even dream that the dashing cavalier, who takes every occasion to curse the miserable brigand and his cut-throat band as heartily as any one, is the dreaded leader of the ruthless Hawks of Cababi."

"Will you forgive me if I say that I do not think you are acting wisely in revealing this secret to me?" Mrs. Talbot exclaimed, speaking on the spur of the moment, nettled by the arrogance of the brigand.

Bernal laughed.

"Oh, I have good reasons for speaking as I do, and if you will permit me to be seated I will explain."

The captive could not imagine what was coming.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BRIGAND'S SCHEME.

THE announcement took Mrs. Talbot completely by surprise, and an earnest look came over her face, for the thought occurred to her that the brigand's indifference in regard to keeping the secret of his disguise boded no good to her.

She concealed her apprehension, though, and said quietly:

"It is not for the prisoner to give permission to the jailer."

"My dear Mrs. Talbot, try to forget the actual facts in the case for a while," Bernal remarked.

"Try to believe that you are in this hacienda as an honored guest, and that your lightest

wish is as strong as the most powerful command."

"Ah, I am afraid that if I tried to believe that, I should speedily wake to a consciousness of the truth," she replied. "For the first thing I would do would be to get myself safe out of this place, and that would not agree with your plans at all."

"You are right in regard to that," Bernal replied with a laugh. "I went to too much trouble to get you to allow you to depart at your own free will."

"So I should imagine, and under the circumstances you see it is an utter impossibility for me to deceive myself into the belief that I am a guest and not a prisoner."

"Well, well, do the best you can, but I can assure you that as far as I am concerned I shall not do anything to recall to your memory that you are a prisoner and not a guest."

"I have always heard it said that you were an extremely pleasant host, even though your visitors were well aware that they were not free to depart at their pleasure."

The brigand bowed at the compliment.

"I flatter myself it is the truth," he remarked with an air of satisfaction. "When I made up my mind to embark in this business—which I flatter myself I have followed more successfully than any man who has ever levied toll on the public in Sonora—I determined to conduct it in a first-class manner; I did not intend to pose as a low, mean, petty robber; I determined to be a big chief, as one of these Americans would say, and I think all Sonora will do me the justice to admit that I have carried out the idea in an extremely successful manner."

"No doubt of that; your name is the terror of the province."

"Mrs. Talbot, I can see that you are a lady both by birth and breeding, and I have no doubt that you would be willing to do full justice even to a man like myself without being prejudiced against me by anything that you may have heard."

This was rather an odd speech, and the captive did not know exactly what to make of it.

"I assure you that this is the truth," Bernal said, in a tone of question.

"Yes, sir, I think I can be trusted to do justice to any one, no matter whether the person is a friend or a foe," Mrs. Talbot answered.

"That is exactly the impression that I had formed in regard to you," the brigand remarked with an extremely polite bow.

"Now then, I am going to ask you a very plain, direct question, and I trust you will answer me frankly and freely."

"I certainly will if I can," Mrs. Talbot answered, considerably amazed.

"Oh, you can answer easily enough, if you only choose to do so," the brigand replied.

"It is in regard to myself that I am about to speak, and I trust you will give your opinion about the matter fully as freely and frankly as though I had questioned you concerning a stranger."

"I certainly will try to do so," the captive replied, puzzling her brain in regard to what was coming.

"Now then—casting all prejudice aside—do you think there is anything low or mean about me?"

An amused look appeared on Mrs. Talbot's face at this odd question.

"Come! don't be afraid to answer!" Bernal exclaimed. "I can bear the truth, no matter what it is!"

"Well, I must answer in the negative."

"Supposing that you did not know me to be the leader of a band of brigands, what would you guess me to be?"

"What occupation?"

"Yes."

"A soldier."

The brigand smiled.

"You would not be far out of the way," he remarked. "I was a soldier once—a bright and promising one, so men said. But two things interfered with my advancement; in the first place I had no rich, powerful or influential friends to aid me, and in the second, I was an inveterate gambler, and, I am sorry to say, usually a most unlucky one."

"This vice proved my ruin, for I was getting along very well, although I had no friends at headquarters to speak a good word for me, but I understood the trade of war and in some Indian troubles managed to distinguish myself in such a way that it was not possible for my superior officers to be blind to my success."

"The accursed gambling though in the garison rendered naught all my efforts in the field."

"One night in particular I played so recklessly and fortune was so much against me that almost before I knew what had happened I found myself largely in debt to a brother officer who was my mortal enemy, for he, although my superior in command, had failed ingloriously in the field where I had won laurels."

"He pushed me for payment, uttered derogatory words, which, in my desperate state of mind, I would not have brooked from any man on earth, not even from a king."

"We quarreled, and a duel followed; I was

the victor, being unlucky enough to kill my man. I say unlucky, for the fatal result of that fight cost me my commission."

"I had plenty of jealous rivals, envious of my success in the field, and though the fight between myself and my calumniator was as fair a one as ever took place, not fought in secret either, but in the presence of witnesses, yet the charge was made that I had taken an unfair advantage of my adversary and compassed his death by foul means."

"I can easily understand, under the circumstances, how such a thing could occur," Mrs. Talbot remarked.

"Bear in mind the difference in the positions of myself and the man who provoked me to the encounter," Bernal remarked. "I was poor and friendless, he rich, powerful, with a host of influential relatives and friends."

"If he had proved the victor in the fight there would have been a multitude to applaud him for his triumph over an upstart who had had the insolence to show the world that he could handle men in action better than the blue-blooded officers who could trace their line back to the Spanish conquerors of Mexico."

"Oh, yes; no doubt of that!" the captive exclaimed, interested, despite her position, in the story.

"But as I was not the victim, but the victor, there was a frightful howl of indignation raised, and the charge was openly made that I had not fought fairly."

"The wealthy relatives of the dead officer were determined upon revenge. I was arrested and tried by a court-martial, thanks to the influence wielded by these influential friends of the dead man. False evidence enough was produced to warrant the court in sentencing me to death. I was to be stripped of my uniform, my sword broken in the presence of my regiment and then to be shot."

"It was dreadful!" the prisoner exclaimed.

"Yes, when you take into consideration the fact that I was perfectly innocent of any wrongdoing, my only crime consisting of meeting in a fair fight a man who had grossly insulted me, and if I had not encountered him, after being thus wronged by him in the presence of witnesses, I would have been considered to be a vile coward by every man who knew of the affair."

"You will perceive that I was between the two horns of the dilemma; either I had to meet my man and kill him in order to protect my own life, or else be forced out of the army as a rank coward."

"It was a perplexing situation."

"Yes, and looking back upon it with the light of my present experience—this affair happened some five years ago—I can see that the course I took was by far the best."

"As I said, I was tried and condemned, but the sentence was never executed, for I contrived to escape from the jail in which I was confined on the night preceding the day when my punishment was to take place."

Mrs. Talbot drew a long breath, for she had listened to the tale with a great deal of interest.

"From that day to this I have led a life of adventure," the outlaw chief remarked. "The law had wronged me—made an outcast out of me—and my hand was against the law."

"Fleeing for my life, a hunted fugitive, I found shelter and safety amid the wilderness with men who were fugitives from justice—so-called—like myself."

"In time I organized a band of my own, and I think I may say without fear of being considered a boaster that as an outlaw chieftain I have acquired a reputation second to no man who has ever operated in that line in Mexico."

"Yes, I think that is true," Mrs. Talbot admitted, "although of course being a stranger to this part of the country, I am not perhaps competent to give an opinion."

"If you should question any of the old gray-beards—men who can go back for fifty years—I am certain they would confirm the truth of my words."

"But now, I suppose, Mrs. Talbot, you are wondering why I have taken the trouble to relate the history of my life to you."

The lady bowed assent.

"I have a motive, of course, for I am not a man who wastes time in idle talk," the brigand declared.

"By the way, I have opened communication with your husband."

A flash of joy appeared in the dark eyes of the captive.

"But the result is rather unsatisfactory," Bernal added.

"How so?"

"Well, I fixed your ransom at what seemed to me to be the reasonable sum of twenty thousand dollars."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Talbot, in amazement.

"You seem to be surprised?"

"I am, at the magnitude of the sum."

"Why, it ought not to be more than a flea-bite to a man like your husband," the outlaw remarked. "Does he not bear the title of the Ranch King, and is he not rolling in riches?"

"He is no millionaire!" Mrs. Talbot declared, "and although he is not a poor man, yet he is

not rich enough to justify such a title as the Ranch King."

"So he declared to my agent, and my man believes that he is speaking the truth too when he declared that it would not be possible for him to pay so large a sum as twenty thousand dollars, and my agent—a shrewd fellow mind you—advised me to be satisfied with ten thousand."

"Even that is a princely sum," Mrs. Talbot remarked, with a dubious shake of the head.

"Well, your husband seemed to have an idea that he could raise that amount, but, do you know, I do not feel like taking it," the brigand chief remarked in a reflective sort of way.

"Upon my word, sir, you will not get any more, and I very much doubt if my husband will be able to raise that amount of cash," the captive declared.

"Oh, you misunderstand me," Bernal replied. "I was not speculating upon getting any more. Ten thousand dollars would pay me well enough, but I have been thinking the matter over, and I think I had just about as lief have you as have the money."

The captive stared in amazement, for this declaration was entirely unexpected.

"Have me?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I have taken a fancy to you," Bernal admitted, in the most candid manner.

"I have seen a great many women in my time, but I do not remember to have ever met one who pleased me as well as you do."

"Oh, now you are jesting with me!" Mrs. Talbot exclaimed; the cool, matter-of-fact way in which the brigand spoke astonished her.

"No, no, I never was more serious in my life. I have been captivated by your charms, and I have made up my mind that I would rather have you than the money."

"I am rich enough to afford to throw away ten thousand dollars. Now do not make any mistake. I do not intend to do you any wrong, nor is it my purpose to make a brigand queen of you. I am beginning to tire of this life, and have about made up my mind to retreat from it. I have plenty of money, and in Mexico money will do more than in almost any other country in the world."

"It will hardly buy you pardon from the Government though; your lawless acts will never be forgiven," Mrs. Talbot asserted.

"That statement is far from being correct," the brigand replied. "Doubtless you will be surprised to learn that I am already in communication with the Government. A new ruler has come to Mexico since the days when I was unjustly condemned, and the party who were in power then, the friends of the officer whom I killed, no longer have the strength to harm me."

"Fernando Bernal will suddenly disappear—killed by some man whom he wronged, so the story will be given out—and Captain So-and-So—I will not mention the name at present—will reappear, acquitted of all blame."

"But some one will be sure to recognize and denounce you."

"Oh, no, you forget that I am always disguised when on a raid, and if any of my brigand band should attempt to try that game, what would the word of any worthless scamp be worth opposed to mine?"

"Do not trouble yourself about that. I am perfectly safe, and even if the Government was satisfied that I had done a little brigand business in the hot days of my callow youth, they would wink at it, as they have done with Cortina, whose deeds on the Lower Rio Grande will not bear inspection."

"But you seem to forget that I am already married."

"Yes; but not according to our Mexican church," the bandit replied, coolly. "We don't look upon such marriages as amounting to anything. You can wed me according to our customs. It is my intention to go to the Lower Rio Grande district, and your husband will never be apt to trace you there, and if he did and kicked up a row I would speedily find a way to stop him."

A smile passed over Mrs. Talbot's face at this boast, for she thought that bold Injun Dick would make short work of the vaunting Mexican if he could only get a chance at him.

"Well, give me time to reflect, for this proposition is so sudden and unexpected that it has taken me completely by surprise."

"Certainly; take all the time you like—that is, in reason," the brigand responded, gallantly.

Then he rose.

"For the present, adieu."

And, with a respectful bow, he departed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DARK DEMISE.

THE brigand chief was no fool, and the smile which had appeared on the face of the lady when he had announced that he would take care of the husband, did not escape his keen eyes.

"She has confidence in this Ranch King, and it is her belief that he would get the best of me if we came together," he murmured, as he

made his way to his private apartment in the ranch.

"The smile upon her face revealed that to me; and her request to be allowed time to think the matter over is only the device of a clever woman to put me off."

"The more time she can gain, the more chance there is for her husband to come to her rescue."

"I blundered in not telling her how the troops had tried to take me in my stronghold and how handsomely I whipped them."

"If she was aware of that circumstance perhaps she would not feel so sure that her husband would be able to rescue her, for I have no doubt that is what she is calculating upon."

"These North Americans are a miserly race, and they hold on to their money as long as possible, and it is more than probable that this Ranch King will not try to ransom his wife until he is satisfied that the Government troops will not be able to rescue her; it will be fully a month before they will be ready to move against me, but they will only have their labor for their pains, for, like the lively flea, when they go to put their finger on Bernal, the brigand, he will not be there."

By this time the outlaw was at the door of his own apartment, which he opened and entered.

Within the room sat the Jew, Aaron Mosenstein.

Although this individual had stoutly protested to Dick Talbot that he knew nothing whatever about the brigand, yet in reality he was the trusted agent of the outlaw and had been so ever since Bernal had been operating in Sonora.

After the Jew's arrival at the hacienda, and his report of his interview with Talbot, Bernal had requested him to wait until he—the brigand chief—saw the captive and had a talk with her about the ransom.

"Vell, vell, my tear fr'ent, vot does der womans say?" the Jew inquired, eagerly.

"She tells about the same story as her husband; it will not be possible for him to raise twenty thousand dollars, and in fact she seems to doubt if he will be able to get ten thousand together," Bernal replied.

"Vell, that is the way mit der womens always," the Jew declared. "Der fair sex is never willing to give up a tollar if dey can possibly hold on to it."

"I don't know about that in this case," the outlaw chief remarked, thoughtfully. "The woman talks as if she meant every word she says, and it may be, you know, that the wealth of this Ranch King is exaggerated. He may own a lot of property, have a big ranch, well-stocked, and yet not be able to command much ready cash."

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish true," Mosenstein admitted.

"You cannot always believe everything you hear, you know."

"Oh, yesh, mine gootness, dot ish true!" the Jew exclaimed. "I know how dot ish mineself. If you vas to believe vat der peoples say about me you vould think I vas shust rolling in wealth—"

"Oh, but you are, you know," Bernal interrupted. "There isn't any use for you to attempt to deny it. Everybody who knows anything about you knows that it is so."

"Ah, my tear, I see you vill have your joke," the Jew said, attempting to laugh the matter off.

"You know you have plenty of money, Mosenstein and I have often thought that it would be a good stroke of business for me to seize you some time and hold you for a ransom," and the brigand smiled as he uttered the remark.

For a moment the Jew looked alarmed, but when he saw the smile upon the face of Bernal he comprehended that the other was only making game of him.

"Ah, yesh; you vould make a heap of monish out of me, and then who vould you get to look after der business?" Mosenstein inquired with a cunning chuckle.

"That is true; you have been a useful man to me, but you have been deucedly well paid for it."

"Yesh, yesh, but, my tear captain, t'ink of der risks I have run from der law!" And the Jew gave a nervous twitch as though already he felt the firm grip of the officers upon his shoulder.

"Nothing venture, nothing win!" quoted the brigand chief. "It is an old maxim and an extremely true one."

"Dot ish true, but my tear, if it vash not for de fact dot we have done mooch business together I vould not do any more mit you," Mosenstein remarked.

"It has been all right—dangerous, of course, but not so very bad, but now all der country is alarmed, and inside of a month der soldiers vill be everywhere," the Jew continued, shaking his head solemnly.

"The outlook does seem to be a little stormy."

"Mine gootness, yes, my tear fr'ent!" Mosenstein declared. "It looks as if der thunder and

der lightning vas going to strike all round us. Und dis Talbot, der Ranch King, mine gootness I do not like dot man, he is dangerous. I do not like any of dem Americans; they are not like der Mexicans—they are bulldogs and bloodhounds rolled into one."

"Yes, they are ugly fighters, and now, Mosenstein, old fellow, I am going to confide a secret to you," the brigand chief remarked. "I have made up my mind that I have had about all I want of a brigand's life."

"Is dot so?"

"Yes, I have contrived to feather my nest pretty well, and now that the country is getting rather too hot for comfort I have made up my mind to retire."

"Mine tear fr'ent, I t'ink you are wise."

"That is my determination. I have taken a fancy to this Mrs. Talbot and I would rather have her than the ten thousand dollars."

"Mine gootness! ish dot so?" cried the Jew in astonishment.

"Yes, I am going to marry the lady and retire from business."

"I do not like dot!" and the Jew emphasized the remark with a doleful shake of the head.

"Why not?"

"Dot mans, Talbot, der Ranch King, will be after you."

Bernal laughed contemptuously.

"Bah! do you think I fear him?"

"He ish a goot man."

"Yes; but I am a better, and I have made up my mind to show this Ranch King a trick which will undoubtedly astonish him."

"A trick?"

"Yes; with your aid."

"How vash dot? I tells you, mine tear fr'ent, I like me not dot Talbot, und I vould not like to be mixed up in any scheme where dot mans could get a chance at me."

"Oh, that is all right," the brigand chief replied, confidently. "I will take care to work the scheme so he will not be able to get a chance at anybody. From what you have said I get the idea that it is your belief that this Talbot will not attempt to ransom his wife until he is satisfied that it will not be possible for either himself or the Government troops to rescue her?"

"Yes, mine tear fr'ent, dot ish v'at I t'inks. He did not say dot, you know, but dot ish der idea dot I got from v'at he did say."

"Well, Mrs. Talbot did not intimate that her husband would be far more likely to spend ten thousand dollars, if he could raise it, or whatever sum he could raise, in getting together a force to fight me rather than use the money to ransom her, but I have an idea that some such idea was running in her mind."

"Like as not—like as not!" the Jew declared. "Dose Americans are shust the kind of fellows to do such t'ings; they are fighters from der word go!"

"Well, I want Mrs. Talbot, and I don't want the Ranch King to trouble me. This woman has taken my fancy more strongly than any one that I ever encountered," the bandit chief declared. "There isn't any nonsense about her. She is just the kind of woman to suit a man like myself."

"When we captured the ranch she showed fight like a tiger-cat, but when she saw that we had the upper hand and that it would not do her any good to resist, she submitted to the inevitable in the most graceful way."

"Dot womans has sense."

"Oh, yes; plenty of it. And now that she is here, a captive, helpless in my power, she does not weep or make trouble, after the usual fashion of womankind, but bears herself as placidly as though it was all a matter of course."

"She vas wise."

"Yes, she is just the kind of woman to suit me, one picked out of ten thousand, but I have a suspicion that I will never be able to get her as long as this Ranch King is alive, and so I have determined to end his career."

"Dot vill be no easy job."

"It will not be as difficult as you imagine if a little scheme which I have in view works all right."

"A scheme, hey?"

"Yes; I want you to lead this Ranch King into a trap."

"Oh, mine gootness, no!" cried Mosenstein, in decided alarm. "You must not ask me to do dot, mine fr'ent."

"Do not be alarmed! You will not be exposed to any danger."

"Is dot so?" asked the Jew, decidedly incredulous.

"Yes, you will lead him into a trap without apparently doing so, or in fact knowing anything about the matter."

"How vas dot?" inquired Mosenstein, in amazement.

"These Americans are extremely cunning, you know, and they generally pride themselves upon their shrewdness."

"Dot ish so."

"On that fact my scheme works. I intend that the Ranch King shall walk into the trap of his own free will."

"How ish dot?"

"You must send for him; tell him that you

have seen me and that I am willing to take what money he can raise within a week or two for Mrs. Talbot's ransom, and that as soon as he sees what he can do, come and let you know, then you will go straight to me with the intelligence."

"Yesh, but where is dot trap?"

"You are uncommonly dull to-day," the brigand chief remarked.

"When you tell the Ranch King that you will come straight to me, will it not be immediately suggested to his mind that if he raises a force and follows you he will be led to my retreat?"

"Ah, yesh, yesh, I see!"

"Of course; it is as plain as the nose on your face, and Dame Nature did not slight you in respect to that feature," Bernal observed, with a laugh.

"The Ranch King will jump at the chance to trap me unless I am greatly mistaken in my man," the outlaw chief continued. "He will get his friends together, and when you set out, he will not be far behind."

"Yesh, yesh, it is a beautiful scheme, and you will be all prepared for him?"

"Yes, and if I do not lay out the Ranch King and his party it will be a miracle."

"Dot ish so!" exclaimed the Jew, chuckling with glee at the dark device.

A few more words of unimportant conversation followed, and then Mosenstein departed, and the brigand betook himself to his cigarettes.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MUD TURTLE AGAIN.

MOSENSTEIN mounted his horse and rode off on his homeward journey.

The Jew felt in excellent spirits as he galloped along the trail.

Since the bold battle of the brigands with the soldiers, Mosenstein had been dreadfully uneasy in his mind.

In his judgment, it was most foolish for Bernal to fight the soldiers.

If he had been in the bandit's shoes, his game would have been to retreat to some inaccessible spot up in the mountains, where the troops would not be apt to trail him, and he would have remained there until the military departed from the district.

"It was a bad business," he muttered, as he rode along, his thoughts reverting to the struggle wherein the brigands had so signally whipped the Mexican troops.

"Bernal cannot hope to fight der Government all der while. He may whip dem once or twice, but in der long run dey vill make mince-meat out of him."

"It was a goot idea for him to gife up der game und make himself scarce. Dot was goot; I was glad of it, for I had der fear dot, maybe, der soldiers find out somet'ing 'bout mineself, und dot would be ugly." And the Jew shook his head in a very solemn way.

"Und dot mans Talbot too! I like me not der looks of dot Ranch King."

"It would be a very goot idea to put him where der dogs couldn't bite him."

"Tank gootness dot Bernal is going out of der business!" the Jew declared fervently.

"I hafe trouble in mine shoes ever since dose soldiers come into der district; though I hafe taken a great deal of pains to cover up mine tracks, yet if der captain and some of der principal mans of der band were captured deymight be able to gife me away, and den all der fat would be in der fire."

Busy with these thoughts the scheming Jew rode rapidly along, and leaving him to pursue his journey we will turn our attention to the dusky-hued chieftain who had set out to play the spy upon his footsteps.

Mud Turtle followed on the trail with all the patience and perseverance of a bloodhound.

The trail being fresh was an easy one to follow, and so the Indian did not attempt to keep the Jew in sight, but contented himself with following at a good pace on the trail.

Two good reasons had Mud Turtle for not attempting to follow the Jew closely.

In the first place Mosenstein was pushing his horse onward at such a rate of speed that it would have taxed to the utmost the powers of the Indian to keep up with the steed, and in the second place if he followed too closely in the rear of the Jew, that worthy was likely to turn his head at any moment, and if he caught sight of the figure following on his trail, he would immediately understand that he was being followed, and the moment that discovery was made the game of the Indian was beaten.

So, as we said, Mud Turtle fell into the rear, and contented himself with loping along at a good pace.

All went well for an hour until the trail, after winding through a rough and unbroken country, ran through a broad, open prairie, and here to the disgust of the red-skin trailer, the single hoof-marks of the steed that the Jew bestrode were lost amid a multitude of others, fresher even than the trail that Mud Turtle had been following so persistently.

For a few minutes the chief was puzzled.

The horse of the Jew was "bare-footed"—these new steeds showed no mark of iron upon their hoofs.

With the utmost care the Indian examined the baffling marks; if a human life had depended upon it, he could not have taken more pains.

At last he solved the mystery. A troop of wild horses had passed that way after the Jew had gone, and something had impelled the wild steeds to follow on the track of the rider.

So again Mud Turtle went on; it was his calculation that after awhile the wild steeds would go off by themselves and he would be able to strike the trail of the Jew again, so as he advanced he kept a close watch in order to detect where a single horse's hoof-marks differed from the rest.

This was an extremely difficult task, for the wild horses did not keep together, but covered a good hundred feet of ground.

Two hours Mud Turtle spent in the task, and then he was fain to give it up, completely baffled.

He sat down and meditated for a while, and then an idea occurred to him.

In the rough and broken country, just before the trail entered the prairie was an old hut, evidently the abode at some time of a solitary hunter.

Back to the neighborhood of this hut went Mud Turtle.

He found concealment in a clump of pines near the trail.

From around his body he unwound his stout raw-hide lasso and prepared for action.

He waited the return of the Jew.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE JEW IS SURPRISED.

MUD TURTLE, completely shielded by the thick branches of the pines from any one approaching from the westward, waited with all the patience of the dogged race from which he sprung.

Time passed on, seconds lengthened into minutes, minutes into hours, but at last to the listening ears of the red chief came the sound of horses' hoofs.

A steed was approaching from the westward. At first the hoof-beats succeeded each other with rapidity, showing that the horse was galloping, but as the sound came nearer and nearer and nearer, longer intervals occurred between them.

The horse had gotten into the bad part of the trail and had slackened speed.

Then Mud Turtle peered cautiously between the branches of the pines; he desired to be certain that the new-comer was the man he sought.

His eye fell upon a horseman who, after having galloped his steed at a good rate of speed over the level prairie was now allowing his animal to "breathe himself" by proceeding at a walk.

It was the man for whom the dusky chief waited, Mosenstein, the Jew.

Mud Turtle was all prepared, the lariat in his hand coiled ready for action.

Although the Jew could not be classed as a warrior, yet after the custom of the country he went armed, a brace of revolvers being belted to his waist, and the red-man did not intend to give him a chance to use them.

The Jew came on, talking away to himself in a low tone, after the fashion of men who have much on their minds, and have no confidant in whom they dare trust.

He had not the least suspicion of danger, and a more astonished man was never seen in this world than Mosenstein when he reached the clump of pines and the lasso like a writhing black-snake came hurtling through the air, and the well-thrown noose encircling his form tightened around his middle, pinning his arms to his side so that he was not capable of moving them.

The lasso was followed by the sudden appearance of Mud Turtle, revolver in hand.

The horse shied, frightened by the sudden apparition, and down to the ground came Mosenstein all in a heap.

The steed, being a well-trained beast, only galloped a hundred feet or so away upon being relieved of its rider and then fell to grazing upon the succulent herbage.

Mosenstein had fallen upon a soft spot of ground, so that he was not injured by his sudden descent beyond a good shaking up.

He was terribly frightened though and knew not what to make of the strange circumstance.

Mud Turtle, the reader will remember, was dressed like a peon, and his disguise was so perfect that the Jew never suspected that he was caught but what he appeared.

The tame Indians are, as a rule, a remarkably peaceful race, but once in a while a fighter is to be found among them; usually, however, the potent, fiery Mexican beverages are to blame.

The Jew had come down sprawling on all-fours, but as soon as he recovered from the shock he assumed a sitting position.

"Hold on! what are you about?" he cried, in the usual loud tone employed by the superior white race in addressing the peons.

"You show fight—I shoot!" responded Mud Turtle, in accents which plainly showed that he meant exactly what he said.

"No, no; don't shoot! I am not going to fight!" exclaimed the Jew, in affright.

And this was true enough; even if he had been of a warlike nature he could not have shown fight with any chance of success, considering that his arms were bound tightly to his side—almost as tightly as though they were restrained by an iron band, and that his assailant was menacing him with a cocked revolver while his weapons were in their holsters at his waist.

"Get up!" said Mud Turtle.

Mosenstein displayed considerable alacrity in obeying the command.

"Say, mine goot fr'ent, v'at on earth do you mean by dis?" the Jew asked, after he got on his feet.

It was something so unusual for one of the tame Indians to turn road-agent that Mosenstein could hardly bring himself to believe that it was possible.

When a peon, under the influence of strong drink usually, did become a rogue, their rascality generally took the line of petty thieving, and therefore the Jew was completely astonished by this bold assault, for he had not the least suspicion that Mud Turtle was anything but what he appeared.

"No do what I say you get hurt," the chief responded.

"Oh, mine fr'ent, don't you trouble yourself about dot!" Mosenstein cried, quickly. "I vill do exactly as you say; you will not find a mans in this world more obliging dan I ish. But, mine fr'ent, if you t'ink you ish going to make a goot stake out of me, dot ish where you are going to get fooled mit yourself. So help me Isaac! I hafe not five tollars mit me!"

"You march!" commanded the chief.

"March!" cried Mosenstein, sorely amazed and not knowing what to make of the command.

"Yes, that way," the chief pointed to the old hut half-hid by the bushes on the hillside, and then a sudden thought coming to him, he added: "I tie you first."

"Oh, you need not trouble yourself to do dot!" the Jew exclaimed, in extreme alarm. "I gifes you mine word I vill not attempt to get away!"

But Mud Turtle wisely considered that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush, and he thought that the Jew tied so he could not get away would be better than to trust to his word.

So he cut the lariat just beyond where it encircled the Jew's body and securely fastened the end.

When he finished the operation, Mosenstein was perfectly helpless as far as his arms were concerned.

"Oh, mine goot fr'ent, I do not know why you wants to treat me like dot!" the Jew wailed.

"Git!" exclaimed the red chief, tersely, motioning toward the hut.

"You wants me to go mit dot house?" the Jew questioned.

"Yes."

"And vhy do you want me to go mit dot house?" Mosenstein inquired, totally in the dark as to what his dusky assailant was up to.

"You can get v'at I hafe got shust as well here, but, mine gootness! it vill not pay you for all dis troubles! So help me Isaac! I do not believe I hafe as mooch as two tollars in mine pocket!"

"Never mind—go!" commanded the red-skin, sternly.

The Jew saw that it was useless to talk to his dusky captor, and so, with a deep sigh, he marched off toward the hut.

Although the little cabin was only a rude affair, and had evidently been without a tenant for some time, yet it was in a good condition.

The door, which stood invitingly open, was in a good condition, and was also the shutter which guarded the window, which, by the way, was merely a place about two feet square cut in the slabs which composed the side of the house.

Within the hut was the rude bunk of the solitary hunter, composed of pine boughs, just as the man had left it when he deserted the cabin.

"Sit down," commanded Mud Turtle.

The Jew obeyed, and as he sat on the low bunk, he looked the very picture of misery.

The red-skin fixed his glittering eyes upon him, and as Mosenstein looked in the dark face, the thought occurred to him that he had never seen a more fiendish countenance.

"Mine goot fr'ent, take all I hafe but spare mine life!" the Jew pleaded, beginning to be alarmed for his personal safety, as his captor did not seem to be troubling himself in regard to his valuables.

"Don't be 'fraid," Mud Turtle remarked.

"Oh, no, mine goot sir, I am not in der least afraid," responded Mosenstein, his teeth chattering from fright as he spoke; the Jew was trembling in every limb.

"The brigand, Bernal, hey!" said the red-skin.

The Jew gave a convulsive start, for he was taken entirely by surprise.

"Eh, vat was dot?" he exclaimed.

"You know Bernal."

It was upon the Jew's tongue to deny all knowledge of the brigand, following his usual custom, but there was something about the red-skin which made him think that the fact of being acquainted with the brigand was known to his captor and that it was useless to deny it.

But with the caution of his race he resolved to be sure of this before he committed himself.

"Oh, yesh, I hafe heard of dot feller; you know him, eh?"

"Me want find Bernal," Mud Turtle remarked. "You tell me where I find him—s'pose, hey?"

A light at this point broke in upon the astonished Jew. The confident manner in which the man spoke convinced him that the secret was known of his communication with the brigand, but how the knowledge was obtained puzzled him, and even now, fox-like, Mosenstein endeavored to baffle his captor.

"Mine goot fr'ent, vat should I know about the matter?"

For answer, Mud Turtle replaced the revolver amid the folds of his ragged upper garment and drew forth a long, keen-edged, sharp-pointed bowie-knife.

"S'pose you no tell quick—you feel this, hey?" And the chief drew back his brawny arm as though he intended to drive the knife into the body of the Jew up to the hilt.

Mosenstein fairly wilted in an agony of terror.

"Hold on, hold on, mine goot fr'ent! don't be rash mit dot knife!" he cried, quaking with fear. "Put up dot toad-sticker und I vill tell you everyt'ing dot I know."

CHAPTER XXX.

ANOTHER STRANGER.

"It is good—speak!" said Mud Turtle with a grunt of satisfaction.

The Jew was now so thoroughly frightened that he was ready to do almost anything.

Whether this mysterious peon really knew that he was in communication with the brigands, or only suspected it, mattered not to him.

By this time he had become satisfied that the only way he could escape from being killed was to comply with the request of his captor.

At the same time despite the awful fear under which he was laboring he made up his mind not to tell any more than was absolutely necessary.

He hated to betray Bernal, but under the circumstances what else could he do?

Completely helpless was he in the power of this tame savage, who, in some mysterious way had ascertained that he was connected with the brigand, and after all what difference did it make if he, to save his life, revealed the secret?

There was little to be feared from such a fellow as this, although the man had succeeded in capturing him, yet Bernal and his Hawks of Canabi would make short work of him if he dared to venture near the outlaws' stronghold.

The thought occurred to Mosenstein that the peon desired to obtain the information so that he could make a good, round sum by acting as guide to the troops when they moved to attack the brigands, but as the fellow could not use the information under two or three weeks, as the soldiers would not be in readiness to make an advance movement before that time, Bernal could be warned and have ample time to select a new retreat.

"You want me to tell you about dot brigand," the Jew remarked.

Mud Turtle nodded assent.

"Mine fr'ent, I hafe been to see him about some business."

"Me know that," the Indian responded.

Mosenstein looked a little surprised at the prompt declaration.

"You do, mine fr'ent? Now I wonder how dot can be."

"Go on!" was the stern injunction.

"Oh, yesh, of course. You wants to find Bernal, eh, mine fr'ent?"

"Yes, be quick—no time to fool!"

There was something in the manner of the speaker which conveyed to the Jew the idea that he would be apt to suffer if he did not comply with the command, so he made a clean breast of it, and disclosed the retreat of the brigand.

When he finished Mud Turtle remarked:

"It is good—lie down!"

"Eh?"

The command was repeated.

"Lie down on dot bunk?"

The red-skin nodded.

"Und vat vas dot for, mine fr'ent?"

Mud Turtle's reply was to grasp the handle of his knife, which he had again secreted in his breast, and the celerity with which the Jew extended himself upon the bunk was wonderful.

Then the Indian cut off another piece of the lariat and bound Mosenstein's ankles in such a way that the Jew was rendered helpless, and he finished the job by tying the end of the lariat to the bunk so as to compel the Jew to remain upon it.

"Oh, mine goot fr'ent, v'at for you do dis?" moaned the Jew, now more alarmed than ever, for he had not expected any such treatment.

He had supposed that after he made his disclosure he would be suffered to depart, and he had resolved that the moment he was on his horse's back he would ride for the brigand's retreat at the best speed of which his animal was capable and reveal to him all that had occurred.

Mud Turtle's precaution, though, had completely upset this scheme.

"Make safe," the red-skin replied.

"Am I to be kept here mid dis house in?" the Jew exclaimed, anxiously.

The Indian nodded.

"Maybe I starve to death!" Mosenstein inquired, as this horrible probability flashed upon him.

"Come back, bime-by," responded the Indian, moving toward the door.

"Oh, mine goot fr'ent, do not leave me mit dis house in!" the Jew exclaimed. "I vill mooch money gife you und you let me go."

Mud Turtle shook his head so emphatically that the Jew lost courage to plead further for liberty.

"But you vill come back?" he pleaded.

"You vill not leave me here to starve to death?"

"No, no, be no 'fraid—come soon," and with this assurance the Indian quitted the cabin, and although he had bound the Jew so securely that it did not seem possible that he could escape, yet the red-skin, with all the caution of his dusky race, took pains to close both the door and the window-slutter and fasten them tightly.

"It is good!" the chief soliloquized, after he had completed his work. "The fox no go till I come."

Then the red-skin made another noose in his lariat, and proceeded to capture the Jew's horse, which was busily engaged in cropping the grass a short distance away.

This was not a difficult job and was soon performed.

The horse secured, Mud Turtle vaulted into the saddle and rode away on the western trail, heading directly for the stronghold of the brigands, the lone ranch up in the foothills.

A more disconsolate mortal than the Jew, when the supposed tame Indian left him to chew the cud of bitter reflection, could hardly be imagined.

He was terribly disgusted when the Indian bound his ankles together, and then tied him to the bed, but still more annoyed was he when Mud Turtle closed the shutters of the window and then the door, plunging the interior of the apartment into almost total darkness.

"V'at ish dat?" he had cried when Mud Turtle banged the shutter to the opening. "V'at foolishness do you makes now."

And then when the door was closed he remonstrated still more strongly, but his captor paid not the slightest attention to his words.

"Mine gootness, v'at for you want to do dot? Come off mit such foolishness," he screamed.

No word of reply came from the red-skin, no sound but the extremely slight one of the peon's footsteps as he glided away.

"Oh, thunder and lightning!" groaned the unhappy Mosenstein, "this is worse than never vas! He has closed de door und der window. Now I cannot hear if anybody passes by dis place, und vill have no chance to cry for help."

"Mine gootness, vat a situation!"

And then a sudden idea came to the mind of the Jew, which fairly caused the cold perspiration to start from every pore.

"Oh, mine gracious, I know vat it ish now!" he exclaimed.

"Dot fool of an Indian has heard dot de Governor of Sonora has offered a reward of a thousand ounces for Bernal, der brigand, dead or alive."

"He ish drunk mit mescal und he t'inks he can kill der brigand, und collar dot thousand ounces."

"Now he goes mit der brigand's ranch, und he vill get killed so quick dot he vill never be able to tell vat hurt him; he cannot come back to dis hut und then v'at ish to become of me?"

"Der trail ish a lonely one, not two travelers a day maybe and dis hut is some distance from it, so I would not be heard if I yelled, if der mans was riding right quick."

"Oh, I will starve to death mit dis place!"

And, rendered desperate by the thought, the Jew struggled and writhed, striving to break the strong lariat which held him so securely.

But the Jew was not a strong man, and it needed a giant's strength to burst the tough rawhide, so he only had his labor for his pains.

Then in his rage and despair he swore until he was exhausted.

A good hour had passed away and the Jew was beginning to believe that he already felt the pangs of hunger and thirst, so vivid is the human imagination, when to his joy he heard a noise without which sounded like a footfall.

At first the Jew could not believe that it was real and not a creation of his imagination, but again the sound was repeated.

In his excited state though, Mosenstein jump-

ed to the belief that it was more likely to be some prowling animal than a human.

A man would not be likely to pass that way on foot, and most assuredly the noise he heard was not produced by a horse.

Then the thought came to him that it might be the peon returning, so he called out, lustily:

"Oh, mine fr'ent, is dot you?"

"Hello! is thar somebody in the house?" cried a rough voice, entirely strange to the ears of Mosenstein.

The heart of the Jew gave a fierce leap for joy.

Here was rescue at last.

It was a man, not an animal—a stranger, and not the miserable tame Indian who had treated him so badly.

"Yesh, yesh, mine goot fr'ent, I am in der house."

"W'ot have you got the door all fastened up on the outside for?" queried the voice.

"Oh, dot ish a bit of foolishness!"

"Wa-al, skin my cats! if I shouldn't say that it was! I reckon I have lived a heap of years in this hyer world an' I never run across ary sich trick afore."

"It was a kind of a game dot vas played on me," the Jew explained.

"A kind of a game, hey?"

"Yesh, my goot fr'ent, dot ish vat I said."

"Wa-al, cut me up inter fiddle-strings!" ejaculated the stranger. "I have run across all sorts of games in my time an' have bucked ag'in' the most of 'em from faro down to Chinese fan-tan, but cuss me if I ever heerd of a game like this!"

"If you vill have der kindness to open der door, mine goot sir, I vill tell you all about it," the Jew exclaimed.

"All right, I kin do that."

It did not take the stranger long to get the door open, and once again the glorious light of day shone into the hut.

The man entered.

He was a big, burly fellow, with a fiery red head and a bushy red beard, a veritable giant in size, who looked big enough to whip half a dozen ordinary men.

"Wa-al, wa-al, darn me if you ain't in a pickle!" he cried.

"Yesh, mine goot fr'ent," responded Mosenstein, meekly.

He did not like the appearance of the big fellow at all.

He was evidently a tough customer and was armed to the teeth.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN ODD REQUEST.

"DIDN'T I understand you to say that somebody had been having a game with you?" the big fellow demanded.

"Yesh, mine goot fr'ent, dat is what I said."

"Wa-al, from the way you air fixed I reckon the fun was like the handle of a pump—all on one side."

And then the giant grinned and chuckled hoarsely as though he considered that he had given utterance to a remarkably witty observation.

"Yesh, mine fr'ent, dere vas not mooch fun for me in der game."

"I reckon not! By the 'tarnel hookey! if you ain't trussed up like a turkey ready for roasting!"

And then the stranger out with his big ten-inch bowie-knife and proceeded to cut the bonds which held the unfortunate Jew so tightly.

Two slashes of the knife severed the lariats, and the Jew rose to a sitting posture extremely delighted at being released from his unpleasant position, and yet his joy was tinged with apprehension, for he knew not what fate had in store for him at the hands of his rescuer, being decidedly unfavorably impressed by the stranger's looks and manner.

After cutting the rawhide cords, the big fellow examined the knots which had fastened them with the eye of an expert.

"Whoever tied you up was no green hand at the biz," the new-comer observed, with the air of an oracle. "Durn my old mule's left-hand foot if I ever saw a neater job!" he continued.

"I reckon that if I hadn't put in an appearance or some other cuss hadn't come, you would not have been able to git these hyer pieces of rawhide offen you 'tween now an' doomsday."

"Yesh, mine goot fr'ent, I believe you are right," the Jew replied, stretching out his arms and legs, both of which were stiff from their long confinement.

"If somebody had not come to help me out I would have died, I believe."

And it was in an extremely rueful tone that Mosenstein made the assertion.

"I reckon you ain't far from right when you spit that out," the other declared. "But, I say, pard, who was it that went for to play sich a durned kind of a game on you, anyway? I kin jest tell you w'ot it is: if any two-legged man had tried to play any sich game as that onto me, durned if I wouldn't have his hide to tan into a pair of moccasins!"

"Oh, mine goot fr'ent, can you not guess who it was?" the Jew exclaimed.

Now this speech was simply uttered by the

Jew to gain time to think of some plausible story to tell to account for his being found in such a peculiar situation, for if he were to tell the truth it would reveal to this stranger, whose appearance was so much against him, that he was in league with the brigands.

The big fellow seemed to be busy in thought for a moment, apparently trying to solve the riddle which had been propounded; he pondered on the matter, scratched his head after the time-honored fashion, and then suddenly blurted out:

"Why, of course! you bet yer boots I kin guess the thing an' not half try, either!"

"Ah, yesh, you can?" exclaimed Mosenstein, who hadn't the remotest idea of what the other was going to say.

"You kin bet all the ducats you kin rake together, my sheeny pard, onto it!" the rough fellow declared.

Now Mosenstein had strong objections to being called a "sheeny," but the stranger was one of the kind of men with whom he would not care to argue a question of that kind, so he allowed the obnoxious name to pass without question.

"Vell, vell, mine fr'ent, I thought you would be able to guess," the Jew remarked, with a knowing smile, although for the life of him he couldn't have told what the other fellow was going to say.

"Oh, you kin bet yer pile on it!" the giant exclaimed. "You happened to run across some of these galoots who calls themselves the Hawks of Cababi—the cusses wot run with this Fernando Bernal!"

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish it!" cried Mosenstein, who now saw a chance to escape from telling the truth, and in his mind he wondered that the simple device of ascribing his trouble to the brigands had not occurred to him before.

"I ain't very well posted 'bout these hyer galoots, 'cos you see I am a stranger in these parts, but I reckon from wot I have heerd that they must be pretty lively boys."

"Mine goot fr'ent, dose Hawks of Cababi, mid de'reader, Fernando Bernal, are der vorst mans dot vas ever heerd of in Sonora!" the Jew declared, with due emphasis.

"I s'pose they went through you for yer wealth, didn't they?" the stranger asked, with a sort of hungry glance which fairly made the Jew shiver.

"Yesh, yesh, und I had nothing to speak of, neither."

"I see, I see; durn their gizzards! these cussed Mexicans never give nobody else a show, an' I hate a hog, I do. If I wanted to make a raise out of you to help me on my way, I couldn't do it."

"Mine fr'ent, I do not believe dey have left me two copper coins to rub together!" the Jew declared, pulling an extremely long face.

"That is too durned bad!" the big fellow declared. "As I said afore, I hate a hog!"

"During my travels I have had the luck to get strapped now and then, an' have been r'ally forced to raise a leetle loan from some cuss wot I met on the way, but I never was so mean as to take a man's last cent; no, sir-ee, that wasn't the kind of game I played. I allers give the galoot some show for his white al-ley!"

"Yesh, mine fr'ent, I can believe dot!" the Jew exclaimed, with an expression of great earnestness. "You look like a mans who would do shust dot sort of t'ing."

"Oh, I'm squar', I am! I'm a white man all the way through—all wool, a yard wide, an' warranted to wash!"

"Yesh, yesh, I can believe dot."

Mosenstein was in such a state of apprehension for fear that the big stranger might take it into his head to doubt his statement about his being robbed and search him, that he was ready to say or do almost anything.

"I've only struck this hyer Mexican s'ile a few days, an' I ain't posted as well as I mought be," the giant observed, with an air of reflection, "but I reckon you kin give me a few points."

"Yesh, mine goot fr'ent, und I shall be glad to do it all der while!" the Jew hastened to exclaim. "V'at ish dot you wants to know?"

"'Bout these hyer brigands; I take a big interest in all sich things, an' ever since of struck this hyer Mexican s'ile I ain't heerd of much else but these brigand galoots."

"Oh, mine goot fr'ent, Bernal und his Hawks of Cababi hafe made it very lively for all der peoples who live in der upper part of Sonora."

"So I have heerd; been whooping it up to 'em red-hot, so to speak?"

"Mine gootness, yesh, dot ish der way it has been."

"He has whaled the Government troops outer their boots?"

"Yesh, yesh, five or six hundred of dem cleaned by dose brigands."

"And I heerd that one of his latest raids was over the border into Arizona?"

"Dot vas true!"

"And he played merry blazes with one of the big American ranches."

"Yesh, yesh, der ranch of a Mister Talbot, dot dey call der Ranch King."

"Yes, that is the story I heerd, I reckon. The cuss's name was Talbot—Dick Talbot—I'm thinking."

"Yesh, dot ish der man."

"The story is true then; the brigands raided the ranch and carried off Mrs. Talbot?"

"Dot ish so."

"Waal, now, I reckon you kin take my butes if that air ain't the cutest job that I have heard of for a age of snakes!" the big fellow declared, evidently deeply impressed with the story.

"Oh, these galoots are 'way up at the top of the heap, an' thar ain't no two ways 'bout that! Raid a cuss's ranch, run off his stock and levant with his wife. You kin smash me into pancakes if that don't go ahead of anything that I have ever run across, an' yet I have seen some pretty lively boys in my time." This was uttered with deep reflection.

"Mine goot fr'ent, there has never been such a man in Sonora!" the Hebrew exclaimed.

"And all is fish that comes to their net, too, for they even stopped to gather you in, and I reckon you wasn't well heeled either."

"Mine fr'ent, I did not hafe five tollars!" Mosenstein declared. "But it is ail der same to them. Big or little, it matters not; dey take everyt'ing."

"But I say, old man, hyer is one thing that you haven't explained!" exclaimed the rough fellow, abruptly.

"V'at ish dot?" cried the Jew, full of apprehension.

"W'ot did the galoots tie yer for arter they had skinned you clean?—wot was tha'r little game?—to keep you from follering them, so as to find out whar they roosted?"

"Yesh, yesh," replied Mosenstein, glad of the excuse thus presented.

"But you couldn't have follered 'em—you don't know which way they went—you couldn't track 'em?"

"Oh, yesh, mine fr'ent, I could!"

"You don't say so?"

"It ish der truth!"

"Durn my cats! then you air jest the man I am looking for!" cried the big fellow, his face lighting up with joy.

"V'at ish dot?"

"I want somebody to take me to whar these brigands have tha'r holes!"

"Mine goot sir, you must be crazy!" exclaimed Mosenstein, in consternation.

"Nary time; thar ain't a crazy ha'r onto me!" the other asserted.

"I tell yer you air jest the man I have been looking for ever since I struck this hyer Mexican s'ile and heerd the story of this hyer Fernando Bernal!" the giant protested. "I am jest dying for to git at these brigands!"

"Oho, you vant der thousand ounces offered for Bernal."

"Thousand ounces offered for him by who?"

"By der governor, alive or dead; but if you try for it, mine goot sir, you will be killed, to a dead certainty. You cannot capture der brigand chief!"

"Who in thunder wants to?" the big fellow yelled. "That ain't my game at all! I want to j'ine the gang, an' that's my riddle."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE JEW CONSENTS.

MOSENSTEIN looked at the stranger for a moment as if he felt certain that the man was not in his right senses; then he observed, slowly:

"Did I understand you to say, mine fr'ent, dot you vant a chance to join der band of dis brigand?"

"That is the song I sung, an' you kin bet all the money you kin raise that that is the game I am going to play."

"Mine goot sir, you will be sure to get killed."

"I will take my chances on that!"

"Yesh, yesh, but I could not think of going mit you!" Mosenstein declared.

"W'ot, not go with me arter I got you out of the hole you were in?" roared the stranger, in a way that terribly frightened the Jew.

"Now, mine goot sir, do not be violent! Let me talk mit you 'bout dose matters," said the Hebrew, in his smoothest way.

"Talk be durned!" yelled the big fellow. "I don't want no talk out of you. I want nothing but silence, an' mighty little of that!"

"Mine tear fr'ent, listen to reason!" pleaded the Jew, now beginning to realize that in escaping from one peril he had fallen into another.

"Reason be durned!" the other responded. "I don't want no reason in mine! Will you take me to whar the brigands have their holes, or will you not? That is the p'int, an' now git thar as soon as you kin."

"Maybe I will not be able to find my way," the Jew protested.

"Hyers the best guide in the world!" and the speaker flashed out his big ten-inch bowie-knife and flourished it in close proximity to the nose of Mosenstein, thereby inspiring that worthy with such terror that he trembled until his knees touched.

"Yes, sir-ee!" the big fellow continued.

"The best guide that thar is in all of your durned Mexico. You jest come right along with me, and every time you feel a leetle unsart'in 'bout the way, jest spit it out, an' I'll drive this hyer Arkansasaw toothpick into ye, for an inch or so, and I bet the probe will put you in the right path every time."

Mosenstein saw that it was merely a sheer waste of time to attempt to parley with such a fellow, and although he was reluctant to return to the lone ranch where Bernal had his quarters, for fear that he might meet some of the brigands, and thus his connection with the band be revealed.

That he was the secret agent of Bernal was known only to the brigand chief and his lieutenant, and he never went near the retreat of the outlaws without an appointment being made beforehand and due precautions taken to prevent any of the gang from encountering him.

But he was in for it now; for there was no way for him to escape, and so he resolved to put the best possible face on the matter.

"Very vell, mine fr'ent, since you are determined, I vill go mit you," he said. "But mind you, I cannot guarantee dot you vill find dose brigands, for dey are like der wild ducks, here to-day und gone to morrow."

"Oh, that is all right," the giant replied with a good-natured grin, returning the big bowie-knife to its sheath as he spoke. "I ain't taxing you for to do anything that you can't do."

"You jest let me have my own way an' everything jest as I want it, an' you won't find a better-natured galoot from hyar to nowhere."

"Jest you ax any of the sharps that know me, an' they will tell you that I am giving it to you as straight as a string. Red Bill is my handle, an' I'm the big-horned sheep from 'way up in the Rockies!"

"Come on then; it is quite a walk to der place where I think der brigands are, und we must hurry."

"Skip it lively then, I'm with you clear through, as the flea said when he lit on the nigger's wool!"

Away the two went at a good pace, and as they walked along the Jew reflected upon what had occurred, and came to the conclusion that after all things were not so bad.

This big fellow seemed like a likely recruit, and could take the place of one of the men who had been killed in the battle with the Mexican troops.

Then too he could warn Bernal in regard to the peon who had played so bold a game, and in regard to that fellow, the more Mosenstein reflected upon the affair, the more mysterious it seemed.

The Jew had spent nearly all his life in Mexico, living in all parts of the country, and was as well acquainted with the tame Indians as any man could be, and in all his experience he had never encountered such a peon as the one who had captured him so easily.

In due time the two drew near to the brigand's retreat.

There had not been much conversation between the two on the march.

Once in a while the big fellow would indulge in a little boasting—tell what a good man he was—relate how many towns he had "cleaned out," so as to be able to reign as chief, and predict that when he became one of the brigands he would quickly let the rest of the gang see that there wasn't "any flies" on him.

The lone ranch was guarded by pickets disguised as herdsmen tending sheep and cattle, posted well out, and so the approach of the pair was readily discovered and the news conveyed to the chief.

From a convenient post of observation on the flat roof of the hacienda, so arranged that the occupants could not be distinguished by any one approaching the house over the level plain which surrounded it, the brigand chief, Fernando Bernal, and his lieutenant, Red Dias, by means of a powerful field-glass inspected the newcomers.

"It is the Jew with a stranger," Bernal observed, as he handed the glass to his second in command.

Red Dias took a good look through the glass.

"Yes; and a regular giant of a fellow the man is," the lieutenant observed. "A mighty rough-looking customer."

"There is some mystery about this affair," Bernal observed, thoughtfully, "for the Jew is too shrewd to bring a stranger here without a good reason."

"We will assume our disguises; let the gates be closed the moment they enter and have half a dozen well-armed men ready."

"All right; I will attend to it," Red Dias replied.

The two descended from the roof.

Mosenstein and the big fellow came up, the gate was opened and a couple of men, herdsmen, apparently, were lounging near.

"We want to speak with the master," the Jew remarked.

"You will find him within," one of the men replied.

The pair passed the gate and entered the court-yard, which was in the center of the house

after the fashion of the haciendas common to the land of Mexico.

After the pair were within the court-yard, Fernando Bernal and Red Dias, wearing their long-haired wigs and beards, came from one of the doorways to meet the new-comers.

At the same moment the massive gates swung noiselessly together, moving on their well-oiled hinges without a sound; a couple of doors on each side of the court-yard, opened and in each entrance appeared a group of men, who gazed over each others' shoulders at the strangers as though actuated by pure curiosity.

If the new-comers had taken any particular notice of these men, possibly they would have wondered that none of them had their right hands visible, this useful member being held behind them, but the statement that the right hand of each man grasped a cocked revolver will explain why this was so.

A good-natured grin appeared on the face of the giant when Bernal and the lieutenant advanced, and he ducked his head and said "Howdy!" before the Jew had a chance to speak.

Mosenstein had a difficult part to play, and therefore was a little embarrassed, but he put on the best face he could and began:

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen; if you remember I was along this way this morning, and stopped to see if you cared to sell any cattle."

"Yes, yes, I remember," replied Bernal, in an assumed voice.

"And a strange adventure happened to me after I left here while on the road to Cobota," the Jew said. "I was lassoed by a peon, bound and carried to a lonely hut where I was threatened with instant death if I did not reveal what I knew about the retreat of the brigand chief, Fernando Bernal. Of course, gentlemen, I knew nothing, but the man insisted that I did, and so finally I pretended to confess, and he departed satisfied that he had left me bound and helpless, where I remained until this gentleman came along and released me."

"That is true enuff!" the rough fellow assented.

On the way the Jew had pretended to arrange this story, for he had told his companion that it would never do for him to go to the brigand's stronghold and declare that he had been robbed by the Hawks of Cababi.

"Und, after this gentleman released me, he took der notion into his heads that I did know something about the brigands, und, as he became rather violent, I, to avoid der trouble, told him I would bring him to der country where it was said dot dose brigands had gone."

"Yes, yes, I see," Bernal observed. "Report says that they have a retreat up in the foothills, not far from this ranch."

"Dot is v'at I heard und so I bring der man here, mid der idea dot you could tell him where he might find dose brigands."

"Well, I reckon we can put him on the track," the disguised brigand chief answered.

"And by the way, speaking about cattle, I told you this morning that I did not think I cared to dispose of any, but my chief herdsman has come in, and he reports that there is a bunch of twenty-five that he thinks he can spare if you are willing to pay a good price for them."

"I vill gife der top of der market!" the Jew exclaimed, apparently all business now.

"Well, if you will take the trouble to walk into the house, you will find him in there, and I have no doubt you will be able to make a trade with him," and as Bernal spoke he indicated the door through which he had gone.

"Yesh, yesh, I vill be glad to do der right thing."

"And we will do our best to put this gentleman on the right road," and Bernal bowed to the giant.

"Very mooch obliged!" and the Jew went through the door which was closed after him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE NEW RECRUIT.

"Now, then, let us understand each other," Bernal remarked to the big fellow. "You are in search of some brigands?"

"Right you air, an' no mistake!" the other answered.

"Do you know anything about these outlaws?"

"Wa-al, I reckon I don't know much," the stranger remarked, scratching his head in a thoughtful sort of way.

"Why do you wish to find them?" asked Bernal, rather sharply, and then he added in a milder tone: "You must not feel offended at my blunt questions, for I have good reasons for putting them."

"Yas, so I s'pose."

"A few words will explain," the outlaw chief said, blandly. "We isolated ranchers cannot afford to quarrel with men who wield the power that these brigands do, and as far as we are concerned these bandits treat us pretty well. They make no war on us, but often put a good bit of money in our way, for whenever they require

anything they pay in the most liberal manner; so you see it would not be policy for us to do anything to offend them in any way."

"Sart'in, that is as clear as kin be!" the big fellow assented.

"While of course we are not responsible for their acts, yet we are more inclined to be their friends than their enemies, and if you come to this district with the idea of making trouble for Fernando Bernal and his band, you will not receive any information from us."

"Nary time!" cried the stranger, emphatically. "That isn't my game by a jugful. No, sir-ee, an' you kin bet high on it!"

"What do you want of the brigands?" asked Bernal, fixing his piercing eyes full on the face of the other.

"Say, if I let the cat out of the bag, will you keep it quiet?"

"Oh, yes, you can rely upon our discretion."

"Wa-al, boss, I want to j'ine the gang."

Bernal and his companion looked surprised.

"Oh, it is the honest truth, an' you kin bet all the ducats you kin raise on it, too!" the big fellow protested.

"You see, the fact is, I am about down to bed-rock—'tarnally strapped, an' I reckoned I could do 'bout as well to j'ine this gang as to go to ranching."

"I ain't much of a cowboy, no way you kin fix it, but when it comes to a leetle outlaw business I reckon I kin hold my end up as well as any man that ever stepped in shoe-leather. You see, pard, I have done a leetle road-agent biz in my time, an' I know how the game is run."

Bernal and his lieutenant, Red Dias, exchanged glances.

The same thought had occurred to both of them.

The stranger was a recruit worth having; such a man would be a decided acquisition to the brigand band.

American desperadoes of his type were just the kind of men to fight to the last gasp in a skirmish, having the endurance of the bulldog, while the Mexicans, although brave enough in a certain way, could not be depended upon to "stand up to the rack" if they saw that the fortunes of war were against them.

For a sudden dash they were as good fighting-men as the world could produce, but if the odds against them were great, and they got the idea into their heads that they stood no chance of winning, then they would be apt to lose heart and try to retreat as fast as possible.

"This is a very odd idea of yours, stranger," Bernal remarked.

"Wa-al, that is the way I am built," the big fellow replied, with a grin. "You see, pard, that when a galoot like me gits down to the bed-rock, some little biz of this hyer kind is 'bout all I am fit for. I ain't worth shucks on a ranch, 'cos I am too durned big for to ride, but when it comes to doing a stroke of business in the outlaw line I am all thar."

"Then, too, even if I had a chance to go into anything else, I reckon I would prefer to j'ine these hyer brigands, 'cos they make big money, an' make it easy, too—make it like gentlemen, an' that is the kind of cuss I am, every time."

"Well, I suppose I can put you on the right track, for although I do not really know the exact spot where the brigands have their abiding-place, yet I can make a shrewd guess in regard to it."

"Of course—I understand how the old thing works," the stranger remarked, with a knowing wink.

"You don't savvy enuff 'bout these hyer cusses for to be able to tell the sodgers whar they kin be found if they come up this way on the war-path, but you do savvy enuff for to be able to direct any cuss who kin be trusted to the spot whar these hyar gay galoots will be apt to hang out."

"That is about the idea," Bernal admitted. "Excuse me for a moment while I see what my friend here thinks about the matter."

"Sart'in," responded the stranger.

Bernal and his lieutenant withdrew to a corner of the yard.

"What do you think of this fellow?" the outlaw chief asked.

"He seems to me to be a good man," Red Dias replied.

"These American desperadoes are generally fierce fighters."

"Yes; and this fellow certainly looks like a ruffian of the first water."

"When he made known his object the suspicion came to me that he might be a spy," Bernal remarked.

Red Dias shook his head.

"That idea did not occur to you?" Bernal questioned.

"No; I think the fellow is honest enough in his statement. He does not seem to me to be the kind of man who would be selected to play the part of a spy, and from what I know of the Mexican officers it does not appear likely that they would be apt to employ a man of this kind," the lieutenant remarked.

"I was not thinking of the Governor of Sonora," Bernal replied.

"Who then?"

"Why, of the man who has most reason to desire to entrap me."

"Ah, yes; I understand—the Ranch King!"

"Yes; this Richard Talbot."

"But so far he has not apparently made any move that looks as if he intended to fight."

"Very true, and that to my mind is a bad sign," the bandit chief remarked. "Americans of his stamp are not apt to allow themselves to be wronged without taking measures to secure revenge."

"But you have managed the affair so cleverly that the man has had no chance to get at you."

"That is true enough, but the fact that he has not tried looks ominous to me," Bernal observed.

"I felt certain that he would raise a force of cowboys and make a desperate endeavor to rescue his wife from my hands."

"I rather expected that he would make a move of that kind myself, but then, you must remember that before he could possibly have got his cowboys together you had the fight with the Mexican soldiers, and the fact that you succeeded in whipping so large a force would be apt to discourage him from trying a fight with you," Red Dias remarked.

"That is so."

"This Ranch King would have trouble to raise over twenty or thirty men, and what could he hope to do with so small a number, when you succeeded in defeating three or four hundred Mexican regulars?"

"That is about the way that an ordinary man would argue, but some of these Americans are such dare-devils, and are so confident in their own abilities, that they would not shrink from undertaking to whip me with a mere handful of men even after I have routed a whole army of Mexican soldiers."

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt about that!" the lieutenant assented. "I have met with just such men, but from what I have heard of this Ranch King, he does not seem to be one of that kind. So far as I have any knowledge of him he is a quiet sort of fellow, and since he has lived here has not been concerned in any trouble whatsoever."

"Do you remember the old proverb which says, 'Still waters run deep?' asked the brigand chieftain.

The lieutenant nodded.

"It may be so in this case," Bernal remarked. "It is my rule always to consider a man of whom I know nothing to be dangerous, until I obtain proof to the contrary."

"It is not a bad idea," commented Red Dias. "But in this case I do not think there is any doubt that the Ranch King will be more inclined to try to recover his wife by peaceable means than to attempt to rescue her by force of arms."

"You remember our spy, who is right in the ranch, reported to-day that as far as he could discover the Ranch King had no idea of getting a force together."

"Talbot may be shrewd enough to suspect that he is being watched, and so has made his preparations in secret; that is, if he has made any," the bandit chief suggested.

"Yes, that may be true, but to my thinking it is very unlikely."

"What do you think of this tale that the Jew tells of being assaulted by the peon?"

"Oh, I suspect that it is some fool with his brains crazed by liquor who imagines that it will be an easy task to capture you, and so secure the large reward offered by the Governor of Sonora."

"That is the conclusion to which I came, but the skillful manner in which Mosenstein was surprised would seem to indicate that the peon was a man who might prove to be dangerous."

"Hardly," Red Dias replied. "All the peons are generally cunning enough, but they lack courage. The Jew is known to be anything but a fighter, and so the peon did not fear to assault him."

"That is probably the reason. Well, you think it worth while to accept this new recruit?"

"Yes, I do."

"All right, I will direct him to the upper ranch, send him by the long trail, while you cut across the hills so as to be there to receive him, and at the same time you can send out scouts to intercept this peon if he dares to come up this way, and instruct the men to make short work with him if he is discovered."

Red Dias nodded and departed, while Bernal returned to where the big stranger was standing, and delighted his heart by giving him directions by means of which he would be apt to find the men he sought.

"All right, pard, I am onto it, and you kin bet I won't forget you if I make a raise!" And with this assurance Red Billy departed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

THE big stranger followed the trail described by the brigand chief; it was hardly more than a goat-track, and led through an extremely

rough country, but the man who wanted to become a brigand marched cheerfully along, apparently cheered by the thought that he was so near the goal of his ambition.

At last he came in sight of a small hacienda perched up among the rocks; so situated, that, with its thick walls, it was as good as a fort, and a small number of men could easily hold it against a large force, provided the attackers were not furnished with artillery.

"Oho! I reckon that air is my antelope!" the big fellow exclaimed as he came in sight of the house.

There were no signs of life about the place, although the gate was wide open; in fact the hacienda looked for all the world as if it was deserted.

"I reckon that thar ain't anybody in the she-bang," the stranger murmured as he marched up to the gate.

But the house was far from being deserted, as the new-comer soon discovered, for when he came within ten feet of the gate entrance to the hacienda, the lonely spot suddenly became full of life.

Through the gate dashed half a dozen brigands, armed with guns and pistols, which they aimed full at the intruder.

And at the same moment, from the shrubbery on the right and left of the gate came a squad of brigands, all armed and menacing the stranger.

The pines in his rear, which lined the trail, also gave up brigands who had lain in concealment there, so that the American was completely surrounded by a circle of armed men.

"Oh, ho, ho!" roared the big fellow, as he glanced around him at the hostile faces and brandished weapons. "wa-al, now, durn my old butes! if this ain't the biggest kind of a surprise-party!"

If the outlaws had hoped to intimidate the stranger by this display they made a most complete failure, for the man laughed in their faces, and appeared to consider the sudden springing of the trap upon him in the light of a huge joke.

"Ho, ho, ho!" and he laughed heartily; "I reckon I have come to the right shop this time and no mistake!"

Red Dias, with his appearance now altered by the wig and the false beard, was in command of the party who had come through the gate and was the nearest man to the stranger.

"What seek ye here?—speak or die!" he cried, in harsh tones, flourishing the big six-shooter, which he had leveled at the breast of the big fellow, to give due emphasis to his words.

"Wa-al, now, you kin bet all the ducats you kin raise that I ain't in no ways backward 'bout blowing my horn!" the big fellow declared. "An' you don't have to p'int any popguns at me, neither!"

"Oh, I am the biggest galoot to sling chin-music that you kin s'rike from hyer to the golden shores of Californy, an' that is whar I hail from. I'm a Pacific-Sloper, I am, an' my handle is Red Billy! I'm a leetle tin war-hoss on wheels, an' if any man hyer thinks he kin down me in a fair fight, all he has got to do is to peel an' wade in! Let him shuck himself and I will climb him so durned quick that he will never know w'ot hurt him!"

The brigands looked at each other. There were some good men in the band—men of all nations, although there were more Mexicans than aught else—but there was not a man of them all who appeared anxious to accept the bold defiance.

"Don't all speak at once, 'cos I can't accommodate more'n one at a time, if the fight is to be a fair one, but I don't care if, as soon as number one is cleaned out, number two hops in! I'm good for a dozen of you, an' you kin bet all the rocks you kin raise on it, too!"

"Explain what you want h-ere first and then perhaps you will get more war than you have stomach for afterward!" the lieutenant exclaimed, sternly.

"Wa-al, I dunno 'bout that, 'cos I'm an awful hog when it comes to a skirmish!" the big fellow observed, with an ugly shake of his bull-like head. "But it is easy for to spit out what I want up in this hyer region. I am arter the brigands, for I want to join the gang, an' I reckon you haven't got a man in yer hull outfit who will do better work than I kin in the fighting line."

"Oh, you don't come as a foe?" Red Dias remarked.

"Nary time! I want to be your pard."

"Put up your weapons, boys, for our friend here is honest, I think," the lieutenant observed.

"Wa-al, now, you had better believe I am!" the stranger declared. "Any man w'ot knows me will tell you that Red Billy is jest the kind of a galoot to tie to!"

Then Red Dias put the applicant through a cross-examination, and the rough fellow answered all the questions in a satisfactory manner.

"I think you will do," the lieutenant said, at the conclusion of the examination. "Come inside and we will put you through the oath of brotherhood, and after that ceremony is performed you are one of the band."

Red Billy declared that he was ready to take any kind of an oath, and followed the lieutenant into the hacienda with prompt alacrity.

The oath was taken in the usual manner; the stranger swore he would be faithful to the band, obey without question all the orders that might be given him, even though one of them might be to slay the dearest friend he had in the world, and though the oath concluded with a fearful invocation, the applicant never hesitated in the least.

"It is our custom to go in couples," Red Dias remarked, at the conclusion of the ceremony, "and you will mess with Durango Joe," and the lieutenant pointed to a tall, swarthy ruffian, about as ill-looking a wretch as the band could boast.

"Glad to know you, pard!" and Red Billy extended his hand, which the brigand was unwise enough to grasp, and the result was that the stranger gave him a grip which caused the half-breed—for such he was—to grunt with pain.

The brigands chuckled; they were just the kind of men to enjoy a practical joke like this.

Red Billy, being now a member of the band, was allowed to go where he liked, although, as the lieutenant took pains to explain to him, the brigands were under strict military discipline and were not allowed to depart from the neighborhood of the hacienda without securing leave of absence.

"That don't make no difference to me!" the recruit declared. "I ain't a Mexican, an' don't know a soul down in this hyer region, an' thar ain't no place I want to go."

Although the new-comer was apparently on the same footing as the rest, yet in reality a careful watch was kept upon him, for it was not the habit of either the brigand chief, Fernando Bernal, or his lieutenant, Red Dias, to trust any man until he had been most thoroughly tested.

Three days passed away, and during that time the careful watch failed to reveal anything suspicious about the big fellow.

He fell in with the brigands' ways as though he had been an outlaw all his life.

The main thing that the bandits did during these "piping hours of peace," was to gamble, and although Red Billy had no money with which to bet—he admitted that he had parted with his last coin before he sought to gain admission to the brigand band—yet as he possessed a good pair of revolvers, and was not afraid to stake them, he was not debarred from playing.

He was not only expert but lucky, and soon managed to accumulate a "stake," much to the disgust of the outlaws, who had picked him out for a flat whom they could plunder.

On the afternoon of the third day, Durango Joe suggested a shooting trip, and nothing loth, Red Billy went.

This was done so that the new man might have a chance to talk to Joe without observation, and so be induced perhaps to betray himself if he was a spy.

But the big fellow was not much given to conversation, and said very little until the two sat down to rest by the side of a mountain stream; then the half-breed commenced the "pumping" operation.

"What do you think of this kind of life?" he asked.

"It is jest bully!"

"You like it, eh?"

"You bet I do! I ain't the kind of feller w'ot hankers arter work, an' this sort of life suits me."

"Well, this is all right; but wait until we go on a raid."

"That is jest w'ot I want!" Red Billy declared. "I want a chance to collar some ducats. Oh, don't I wish I had been with the gang when you got that Ranch King's wife, so I would have had a hack at the cash she'll fetch."

"You will have your share just the same."

"Is that so?"

"Sure!"

"Wa-al, durn my cats if that ain't a piece of luck."

"Do you know the woman?"

"Never saw her in my life; but she must be durned handsome for to fetch twenty thousand ducats, which I heerd in Alter her husband was a-going to give for her."

"Oh, yes, she is a good-looking woman."

"I reckon that if I was the man I wouldn't give twenty thousand ducats for twenty of the best women that thar air on top of the footstool, let alone one!"

"Neither would I," Durango Joe assented.

"I shouldn't mind gitting a squint at this hyer gal, jest to see w'ot she is like," Red Billy remarked. "I reckon twenty-thousand-dollar women are skeerce. I s'pose you have seen her lots of times?"

The other shook his head.

"How's that; ain't she in the hacienda?"

"No; the captain has her away somewhere."

"I reckon he is kinder skeered for fear some of you good-looking cusses will git stuck on her," Red Billy observed, with a prodigious grin.

Just then an antelope made its appearance in the distance.

"Wait here while I drive him toward you!"

the half-breed exclaimed, and then he hastened away.

He had not been gone above a minute or so when a dark face glared out from amid a pine upon the astonished big fellow.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ASSASSIN APPEARS.

It was a bright, pleasant morning, two days after the one on which the events related in our last chapter occurred; over the rolling prairie, toward the ranch of Dick Talbot, came a horseman.

He was a medium-sized, dark-skinned fellow, dressed like a herdsman, and he rode one of the wiry mustangs common to that part of the country.

The rider was some three miles from the dwelling of the Ranch King, but as the trend of the land was to the southward—the rider coming from the north—and the view only broken here and there with clumps of scrubby trees, he could plainly distinguish the home of Richard Talbot.

"That is the ranch evidently, and soon I will see what sort of a man this Ranch King is," the rider observed aloud, putting his thoughts into words.

He stuck his heels into the flanks of the mustang to urge him onward, for the beast was a lazy one, and not inclined to go faster than a dog-trot if permitted to have his own way; the mustang struck into a gallop and kept on at a good pace for a half-mile or so, until in rounding an unusually big clump of scrub-oaks he was startled by a man stepping out from the shelter of the timber, then he shied and made an attempt to "bolt," but was restrained by the strong hand of the practiced rider who bestrode him.

"Whoa there, you brute!" cried the horseman, "did you never see a man before?" And as he spoke he brought the steed to a halt so abruptly by pulling at the reinless curb-bit that the mustang was almost forced to squat upon his haunches.

"Is that the hacienda of Señor Richard Talbot, the Ranch King, yonder?" he inquired.

The man who had stepped from the shelter of the timber was a rather undersized fellow with a dark face, and dressed after the fashion of the peons in rough and scanty attire.

He carried a shotgun and was evidently in quest of game.

"Yes, señor," he replied.

The horseman's eyes shone with a glance of recognition, and he surveyed the stranger intently, but the peon's face was as stolid as though carved out of wood.

"Hello! I think I have seen you somewhere before, my friend," the rider remarked.

The other shook his head.

"You do not think so, eh?"

"No, I do not remember."

"You are as big a liar as ever I see!" the horseman observed in the most candid way.

"Me no lie," responded the peon doggedly.

"You do most certainly if you deny that you and I are old acquaintances," the other retorted.

"Mebbe I have seen you—have seen many men in my time."

"But you don't remember me?"

Again the peon shook his head.

"Well, that is strange!" the rider said in a reflective sort of way. "You are about the last man in the world whom I would have supposed to be troubled with a bad memory."

"By the way, what are you up to now? Are you attached to the Ranch King's forces?"

"Yes."

"Live in the hacienda yonder?"

The man nodded assent.

"Well, that is lucky!"

A look of astonishment appeared on the dull face of the peon.

"You don't understand that, eh?"

"No, I do not."

"I can explain it easily enough. I am in search of a job, cowboy, herdsman, or something of that kind, and you can speak a good word for me."

A peculiar look appeared in the dark eyes of the peon as he gazed upon the speaker, and the rider guessed at once that he did not believe the statement.

"You are incredulous, my friend."

"Oh, no," the peon answered in his stolid way. "it is nothing to me."

"Of course not, but your incredulity convinces me that I did not make any mistake when I jumped to the conclusion that you and I were old acquaintances; if you did not know who I was, and what my past life has been, there isn't any reason why you should be surprised at my taking up a rancher's life, for you must admit that I am got up in true cowboy style."

The other nodded.

"Yes, I flatter myself that my disguise is perfect enough to deceive any one," the horseman continued.

"I must also compliment you upon your get-up."

"Eh?" and a look of blank amazement appeared on the face of the other.

"Oh, you need not stare. I mean every word I say!" the horseman declared. "You look the peon to the life, and if I did not know that you were Sonora Jim, as desperate a cut-throat as ever flourished a ten-inch bowie or pulled the trigger of a six-shooter, I should be deceived into the belief that you were one of these tame Indians with no more pluck than a rabbit."

The other shook his head and looked more stolid than ever.

"You are not willing to own up?"

"You have made a mistake."

"Oh, yes, of course!" the horseman exclaimed, in an extremely sarcastic tone. "I have taken you for some fellow that looks like you."

"Yes, mebbe."

"You cannot fool me with any tale of that kind, Sonora Jim! I knew you too well in the old time not to be sure that you are the man I take you to be," the horseman declared.

"Let me see! it is about two years now since I last saw you, and then you were obliged to get out very suddenly on account of having put a knife into one of the storekeepers at Copperopolis, whom you attempted to hold up one dark night."

"The next time I heard of you it was as a member of Fernando Bernal's brigands, and the report said that you were one of the most daring and bloodthirsty of the gang, and now, old comrade, it is plain to me that you are up to some mischief, or else I would not find you thus disguised, for you are no more a peon than I am."

A dark, sullen look appeared on the face of the other, and the horseman perceiving it, laughed outright.

"Aha, now you appear like your old-time self—the man who was always ready to use the knife or pistol on the slightest provocation!" the rider exclaimed. "And the expression upon your face convinces me that I was pretty near to the truth when I jumped to the conclusion that your being here in this disguise is a proof that you are up to some trick."

"Now, then, since you are not willing to admit to me that you are the man I think you are, as an honest member of society it is my duty to go to this Ranch King and reveal to him that one of his supposed tame Indians is in reality one of the greatest desperadoes that Sonora has ever known—a member, too, of Fernando Bernal's band of brigands, and I have no doubt the Ranch King will quickly come to the conclusion that you are here in this disguise to play the spy upon him, and that you were instrumental in planning the raid which the Hawks of Cababi made upon his ranch."

"Oh, come, you must not do that," the other remarked, slowly shaking his head.

"The Ranch King would be apt to make it disagreeable for you!"

"He would undoubtedly have me hanged," the man admitted.

"You acknowledge that you are Sonora Jim, then?"

"Yes; as sure as you are Lope Escato, the Snake."

And the disguised brigand advancing tendered his hand to the rider.

The two exchanged a hearty grip.

"Now, then, may I ask what brings you here in disguise, for you are no more a cowboy or a herdsman than I am."

"True enough; I will admit that," the horseman replied. "Of course, I have a game afoot. I have heard a great deal about this Ranch King, and the idea came into my head that I might be able to do a good stroke of business if I could succeed in gaining employment from Talbot."

The brigand spy shook his head.

"I hardly think you will be able to do much," he remarked.

"How is that? Is not this rancher an extremely wealthy man?"

"So it is supposed, but he is not in the habit of keeping money or valuables in the house, and you must remember that he has just been plundered."

"Yes; that would be apt to render him cautious," the Snake remarked. "How is he on gambling? Does he ever play?"

"I think not; I never heard of his joining in a game."

"Perhaps I have had my trip for nothing then; but since I have come, I will stay for a while and survey the ground. It was my idea that a man who could raise twenty thousand dollars must be enormously wealthy—it is true, isn't it, that the Ranch King is going to pay Bernal twenty thousand dollars to ransom his wife?"

"That is the price fixed by Bernal, but whether Talbot is going to pay it or not is more than I can say."

"Well, old comrade, I will make a bargain with you. You keep quiet about me and I will not say a word in regard to your being anything but what you appear to be. We will not interfere with each other, you know."

"Oh, that is all right; but I don't think you will make anything."

"It will do no harm to try as long as I am on the ground. What chance do you think I stand of getting a situation?"

"You will not have any trouble about that; the ranch is short-handed and in need of men."

"Come to think of it, I suppose it will be as well not to allow any one to suspect that we know each other, for it might lead to questions which would be troublesome for us to answer."

"Yes, that is true."

"We will be as strangers then."

"Yes."

"Adieu!"

And away the horseman rode toward the hacienda, while the disguised brigand went on his way in search of game.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE ATTACK.

UPON approaching the ranch, Dick Talbot and a couple of herdsmen rode forth, bent on a quest after some cattle that had strayed into the foot-hills of the Cababi Mountains.

But upon perceiving the strange horseman riding toward the hacienda, they halted.

"I would like to speak with Señor Talbot," the Snake said, singling Talbot out immediately for the Ranch King.

"That is my name," Talbot replied.

Then the horseman explained that he was in search of a situation as cowboy, or herdsman, being equally at home with either cattle or sheep.

Talbot did not particularly admire the looks of the man, but as he was short-handed, three of his men being on the sick list, he made him an offer.

The Snake quibbled a little in regard to terms, in order that it should not be apparent that he was anxious for the job, but finally accepted.

Then the rancher said he might as well begin his duties at once and join the party who were going after the stray cattle.

This exactly suited the disguised assassin, for he thought that during the trip he might get a chance to attempt the life of the Ranch King.

He had taken a survey of Talbot and had come to the conclusion that he was a good man—one superior to the average—and that it would not do to give him any chance for his life, if it could possibly be arranged otherwise.

On such an expedition as this, the odds were great that he would be afforded an opportunity to execute his fell purpose without his victim being able to strike a blow in return.

If the party separated, as it would be pretty sure to do after getting into the foot-hills, so as to more speedily discover the whereabouts of the cattle, he would get a chance to select an ambush from which he could shoot the Ranch King down without Talbot being given any show for his life.

The Snake prided himself upon his judgment of men, and having set the Ranch King down for a man who would be apt to make a desperate fight, he had come to the conclusion not to take any risks in this matter, but to earn his money as easily as possible.

After reaching the foot-hills, amid which the cattle were reported to be wandering, the Ranch King gave orders for the men to go in different directions, and it was arranged that whoever first came in sight of the beasts was to fire a shot so as to call the others to the spot.

The bravo inwardly chuckled as he heard the instructions given, and when he rode off, upon the dispersion of the party, he framed his thoughts into words.

"When I fire at the Ranch King, the rest will be sure that it is a signal that the cattle have been seen, and the report of the shot will not excite any surprise."

And then another thought occurred to him which caused an earnest look to appear on his face.

"But the report of the shot will draw the other two fellows to the spot," he murmured. "Will I be able to get away before they come up?"

It was a hard question to answer, and the desperado pondered over it for a while.

"Well, I think the chances are good that I will be able to get so far away before they discover that the Ranch King has been killed that they will not be able to overtake me."

"If I had calculated upon any such event as that, I would have selected a better animal than this miserable little beast," and the Snake dug his heels viciously into the sides of the mustang as he spoke, a proceeding which the horse did not at all admire, and which he resented by kicking vigorously.

"And if I am pursued by these two cowboys, what does it matter?" the desperado continued, as soon as he had reduced his horse to subjection again.

"Will I not be able to give them a good battle? Neither one of them is dangerous, and I should not fear to meet two such fellows single-handed at any time!"

As it happened, the two cowboys were both Mexicans, small, undersized men, good riders, understanding the cowboy's duties to perfection, but neither one could boast of being a great fighting man, and so the Snake was justifi-

fied in believing that if it came to a contest he would be able to get the best of the struggle.

The desperado had taken particular note of the direction in which Talbot had gone, and he had decided to push forward and bear around in a circle so as to intercept them.

The nature of the country, being rough and broken, favored the carrying out of such a plan.

All were proceeding at a moderate pace, keeping a good lookout for the missing cattle, so it was an easy matter for the Snake by pushing forward at a brisk canter to get well in advance of the rest.

He was a thousand feet or so to the right of the Ranch King, and the next man to him; then one of the cowboys was to the right of the Snake, and the other to the left of Talbot, and about the same distance intervened between all of them.

The desperado cantered forward for about a quarter of a mile, and then turned abruptly to the left and kept on until he thought he was directly in the line of the Ranch King's advance.

Then he dismounted, concealed his steed in a clump of timber, and selected a hiding-place behind a bunch of scrubby pines which arose from the earth about twenty feet from the spot where he had hidden his horse.

A better place for an ambuscade could hardly have been found even in that wild and desolate region.

The foliage of the pines afforded ample cover, so that even if the Ranch King had been on the watch for a concealed foe he could not possibly have seen the ambushed assassin until he was within fifteen or twenty feet of the pines, while through the coarse leaves of the evergreens the Snake could command a good view of any one who approached, and was able to take deliberate aim.

"Aha," he muttered, as he settled down in his ambush, "this will do finely! I shall earn this money easily enough, and I should be glad to strike a few more jobs of this sort."

The desperado examined his revolver carefully, and clicked the cylinder around so as to be sure that the tool was in good working order.

The Snake, like most men of his class, took care to have good weapons and was particular in regard to them.

"Now, then, I am ready for this Ranch King!" he exclaimed, in a boastful way. "Let him come on as soon as he likes. He little thinks that he is riding to his death, but it is so, for the moment he gets within fifty feet of this clump of pines a miracle alone can save him, for at that distance I am a dead-shot and never miss my man."

And, having eased his mind with this vaunting declaration, the desperado listened intently for the sounds which would denote the approach of the man whom he designed to murder in cold blood.

He had not long to wait.

Not ten minutes had he lain in ambush when he heard the sound of a horse's hoofs, the animal coming on at a brisk walk, the nature of the ground being such that it was rather risky to attempt to proceed at a better pace.

The Snake, with his cocked revolver leveled through the branches of the pine, glared like a fiend, all his senses on the alert.

Soon the horse and rider came in sight: it was Ranch King as the assassin had anticipated.

Talbot rode on, unsuspecting of danger, his keen eyes strained in search of the stray cattle.

Owing to the broken nature of the ground he was only some fifty or sixty feet away when he first came in sight of the desperado, and he approached in such a way that the Snake did not get what he considered to be a sure chance for a shot until the Ranch King was only some forty feet away.

Then Talbot presented as fine a target as the heart of a marksman could desire; there was not even a bush between him and the ambushed desperado.

"Now, then, Ranch King, you are my nut-ton!" the Snake muttered, through his clenched teeth, as he took deadly aim at Talbot's broad, unprotected breast and pulled the trigger.

Never in all his long career, crammed so full of adventures had Richard Talbot been nearer to death than now.

But Heaven did not design that the man who had boldly confronted a thousand perils, and escaped to tell the tale, should perish here amid the foothills of the old Cababi Range.

Despite all the care that the desperado had taken to be sure that his revolver was in perfect working order, it missed fire.

The hammer fell with a sharp click upon the cartridge, but it was not discharged, and so the deadly bullet went not on its way.

It was not the fault of the weapon; the defective cartridge was to blame.

With a muttered curse upon his ill-luck, the desperado hastened to re-cock the revolver, but he had no chance for a second shot.

Talbot was no tenderfoot, but a man who had passed through as many adventures, according to his years, as any pilgrim who had ever dared the perils of the Western wilds, and when the

sharp click of the hammer coming down upon the cartridge fell upon his ears he immediately understood what it meant.

A concealed foe, ambushed behind the clump of pines, had sought to slay him, and had only been defeated in his purpose by the accident of a defective cartridge.

In such a situation the Ranch King was as prompt to act as any man who had ever won a name in Western border war.

Out came his trusty seven-shooter—no need to raise the hammer, for it was a self-cocker, and a single pull both raised the striker and discharged the ball.

Three shots Talbot fired into the clump of pines before the desperado could succeed in raising the hammer of his weapon, and two of the three bullets struck home.

The Snake was game, though, and, although badly wounded, he rose from his covert and essayed to fire at Talbot.

But the Ranch King was by far the quickest, and again his revolver spoke before the desperado could discharge his weapon, and this time, having his foe in plain sight, Talbot was able to take accurate aim, and he put his bullet through the right arm of the Snake, totally destroying his aim, so that the desperado's bullet whistled harmlessly through the air, high over the head of the Ranch King.

With a deep curse the Snake sunk to the earth, overcome by the wounds he had received.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FORCING A CONFESSION.

THE Ranch King dismounted from his horse and approached the disabled desperado.

The Snake had sunk in front of a little clump of bushes, and as he leaned back, the tough bushes supported him so that he was in a sitting posture.

A faintness had come over the desperado, and as he reclined against the bushes, with his eyes closed, he appeared like a man who was not long for this world.

In a few minutes, though, he recovered from the shock, and, opening his eyes, glared with hatred up into the face of the Ranch King, and then, with a sudden impulse, his left hand sought the butt of the revolver belted to his waist.

The keen eye of the Ranch King was upon him, though, for Talbot guessed what desperate thought was in the mind of the wounded man the moment he moved his hand.

"Don't try any game of that kind," the Ranch King warned. "I reckon you are pretty badly wounded as it is, but if you provoke me to put another bullet into you I will drive it through your brain, and there will not be any doubt about that being a settler."

"I am wounded and helpless; if I was myself you would soon see what a fight I would give you!" the desperado exclaimed, angrily.

"Well, it appears to me that you had more than a fair show in this skirmish," Talbot retorted. "And now, stranger, will you have the kindness to explain to me what is the meaning of this racket—why have you sought to kill me?"

"Oh, I have crazy spells sometimes," the other replied, evasively. "When one of the spells comes on, I am sure to attack the first man I encounter."

"Is that true?"

"It is."

"See here, my bold cowboy, I reckon you take me for a flat of the first degree, and if you do you make a big mistake. You cannot fool me with any yarn of this kind, for I know better. I didn't like your face when you applied to me for a situation, and made up my mind right there and then, that you were no better than you ought to be; but, as much as I know about men, I never jumped to the conclusion that you were nothing but a miserable cut-throat and that your sole business in this region was to get a chance to kill me."

"It is not so!" the desperado declared, sullenly.

The excitement of the struggle having passed away, the Snake had awoke to the consciousness that he was in a particularly tight place, and one from which he would be lucky to escape with his life.

The wounds which he had received did not trouble him—although they were severe and extremely painful—as much as the thought that now he was helpless in the power of the Ranch King that gentleman might take it into his head to dispatch him without ceremony to the other world.

Under like circumstances he knew that he would not hesitate for a moment in executing vengeance upon a foe whom he had helpless in his power, and he feared that the Ranch King might prove to be equally merciless.

"You ought to believe me when I say that my attack on you was due to a crazy spell," the Snake protested.

"I got a wound on the head in a fight about a year ago, and every once in a while I get insane streaks, and then I always want to kill some one. It does not matter who it is—I attack the first man I come across."

"You ought to see for yourself that there is not any reason why I should want to harm you."

You are a stranger, and never did anything to me, and then, too, you have just given me a job, which I can tell you I need pretty badly."

"All you say seems to be true, but I will tell you frankly that I do not take the least stock in it," Talbot replied.

"I have been taking a good look at you and I have come to the conclusion that you are not a cowboy at all."

"Well, I admit that I am more of a herdsman than a cowboy."

"You are neither cowboy nor herdsman; you are not the kind of a man to gain your bread in any honest calling, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"I was willing enough to come to terms with you," the Snake responded, sullenly.

"Oh, that was only a blind to throw me off my guard," the Ranch King responded, quickly.

"You came here and sought employment so as to be able to get a chance to murder me, and you did not fail to improve the first opportunity that offered."

"Now I know the game just as well as though I had planned it!"

"The game?" the ruffian remarked, in a tone of question.

"Yes, the game that you came here to play—the game which you would have won if it had not been for the accident of the defective cartridge."

"I don't understand you," the other protested, in a sulky way.

"Oh, yes, you do. I have got your measure all right now. You are a desperado—a bad man who prides himself upon his skill with weapons, and I don't doubt that if you got your price you could be hired to murder any man, no matter who he was, if you thought there was a good chance that you would be able to commit the crime and manage to escape."

"It is a lie!" the desperado exclaimed, hotly.

"No, no, it is not! It is the truth and you know it. You have been hired by some one to murder me. I have a foe, although I was not aware of the fact, and this foe seeks my life. He is not brave enough to openly assail me, and so he hired you to put me out of the way, and now I want you to tell me who employed you."

"I have nothing to tell," the Snake answered, glaring at the Ranch King in sullen, impotent rage.

"We will see about that," Talbot remarked, quietly, and yet with a world of menace in his tones.

At this moment the two herdsmen rode up, having been attracted by the sound of the shots, and their astonishment was great when they learned what had taken place.

"This fellow is a hired bravo who came in the disguise of a cowboy for the express purpose of killing me, but luckily his pistol missed fire and I was able to lay him out," the Ranch King explained.

"Why not finish him at once?" cried one of the Mexicans, with all the cruelty of his race; and the man clapped his hand on his revolver as he spoke.

"Don't be in a hurry," Talbot rejoined. "We must give this fellow time to think of his sins, and allow him a chance to repent, and perhaps he will want to free his mind of some matters before we launch him into the other world."

Despite the courage of the desperado, a slight chill came over him as he listened to the speech which was so full of menace.

The Ranch King looked around him as though in search of something, and the others watched him.

Twenty feet away was an oak tree standing alone, and somewhat larger than its fellows.

It was crooked and distorted, and one stout limb sprung out at right-angles from the trunk.

"Take your lariat, rig a hangman's noose in the end and place it around the neck of this scoundrel," Dick Talbot commanded.

The Mexican dismounted and obeyed the order with alacrity.

"What are you going to do?" cried the desperado, his face growing white.

"I am going to hang you to that tree yonder unless you make a full confession as to who instigated you to murder me!" the Ranch King exclaimed, sternly, and he pointed to the solitary oak as he spoke.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SNAKE SPEAKS.

THE desperado was a brave enough fellow; with weapons in hand he would have fought to the death if there had been any chance of beating his foes, or if he had been in a corner so that he could not escape; but under the present circumstances he trembled.

To be hung like a dog—to die, strangled to death by a lariat, was not at all to his taste.

"You vile American, you will not dare to murder me in this way!" he screamed.

"Will I not?" the Ranch King inquired.

"Well, now, if you believe that, you never were more deceived in your life. You just wait

five minutes and see if I will not dare to hang you."

"Take him up, boys, put him under the tree, throw the end of the lariat over the branch, and run him up when I give the word."

The other horseman dismounted and hastened to join his comrade who stood by the side of the wounded desperado.

Then they seized and carried him to the tree, the noose of the lariat was placed around his neck, and then the other end thrown over the projecting branch; all was in readiness to execute the sentence which the Ranch King had pronounced upon him.

Lope Escato howled with pain, and swore at the top of his voice while this proceeding was going on, but the others paid no attention to him.

"Now then, are you all ready, boys?" the Ranch King inquired.

"All ready," the pair answered in concert, and involuntarily they tightened their grip on the lariat, thus drawing the noose unpleasantly tight around the neck of the desperado.

"Hold on! I will confess!" howled the Snake, now for the first time showing the white feather.

"It is too late!" the Ranch King cried, fiercely, for the first time betraying traces of anger. "I am going to hang you now, anyway!"

But though bold Injun Dick delivered this speech as though he meant every word of it, he was not in earnest.

It was only a "bluff" to frighten the desperado into a full confession.

The scheme worked even better than the Ranch King anticipated, for the Snake was so impressed by the declaration that he believed there was no chance for him, and now that death was so near he was as afraid to die, as the veriest coward in the land would have been.

"Spare me, spare me!" he shrieked, "I am not fit to die! I will reveal everything! I was hired to kill you by foes who desired your death! I will tell you who they are and all about tame, and I can tell you another secret which you little suspect—Fernando Bernal, the brigand chief, has a spy right in your hacienda."

A look of interest appeared upon the face of the Ranch King, and the Snake, watching the play of his features, all his senses quickened by the peril which menaced him, fancied there was hope of mercy.

The Ranch King did not expect the disclosure in regard to the spy, for he had no idea that this desperado knew anything about the matter.

Talbot suspected that the outlaw chieftain *did* have a spy in disguise on his ranch, but the intimation of the bravo that he could tell all about the matter was a decided surprise.

"You do not deserve to live—you ought to die," Dick Talbot remarked, purposely prolonging the scoundrel's suspense.

"If you hang me, you will give your foes an advantage," the desperado urged.

"You will make a clean breast of it if I spare you?"

"I swear it!"

"Go ahead then, and if your information is worth anything I will not have you hanged."

"You shall have the truth and nothing but the truth!" the Snake protested.

"See that you stick to that," Talbot warned.

"Oh, you shall have the truth—be sure of that!" the desperado declared.

And then he proceeded to relate how he had been approached in Silveropolis by two men who had bargained with him to undertake the job of assassination.

One of the men was a stranger whom he had never seen before, and from his appearance one would be apt to suppose that he was a tenderfoot from the East; the other was well-known to the desperado and he gave his name without hesitation.

"Curly Kid, eh?" the Ranch King remarked.

"That is his name; he is a sport—a gambler."

"I do not know him, and it is a mystery why he should be willing to pay so large a sum to have me killed."

"It is my idea that the other—the stranger—is the principal," the Snake observed.

"I will have to visit Silveropolis and call these two gentlemen to an account," the Ranch King remarked. "And now, in regard to this other matter—this brigand spy who is in my service?"

"He is a tall, dark fellow, as big a scoundrel as there is in the country, and is now disguised as a peon, but he is no peon, being a half-breed, and he is called Sonora Jim."

"There are two or three men on the place who answer to that description," Talbot remarked. "Do you know the name that he is traveling under now?"

"No, I do not. I encountered him just by accident on the prairie as I was riding to the hacienda, and although it is some time since I last saw him, I remembered and recognized him at once," Escato replied.

"He tried to persuade me that I had made a mistake, but I would not stand any such nonsense, you know, and at last he admitted that he was the man I took him to be, and he is now, and has been for some time, one of the leading men of Fernando Bernal's band."

"I should like to be able to pick out the man without having to call upon you to identify him," the Ranch King remarked.

"I can give you a clue to him," the Snake exclaimed, abruptly. "He had a shot-gun and was out after game when I encountered him."

The Mexicans exchanged looks and the Ranch King nodded.

All knew who the man was now.

"Tio Cibuta is what he calls himself," Talbot remarked. "And the fellow has played his cards so well that I never suspected that he was anything but what he pretends to be."

"Well, have I earned my life?" the desperado asked, evidently anxious.

"Yes, for I think you have told the truth, and if I discover that you have not it will be an easy matter for me to hunt you up and call you to an account."

"You are welcome to do it if you discover that I have lied to you," the Snake replied, earnestly.

"And now the question is, what are you going to do?" the Ranch King asked. "Are you able to travel?"

"I think so, if you will have one of these men bind up my wounds," the other replied. "It is not far to Arivaca, and I have relatives there with whom I can remain until I recover."

"Very well, and the pair can accompany you, so as to be sure that you reach the town in safety. You will keep your tongues between your teeth, men, of course, in regard to how this man received his wounds."

"I had an encounter with brigands who attempted to rob me; that is a plausible tale," the wounded desperado remarked.

"Be it so; they will not reveal the truth," the Ranch King replied.

Then the wounds of the desperado were attended to, and afterward he was assisted to mount his horse.

In company with the two herdsmen he departed for Arivaca, while Dick Talbot rode back to his ranch.

He had something else to attend to now besides hunting stray cattle.

"If he could succeed in getting hold of the brigand spy there was a good chance that he might be forced into a confession, so that a blow might be struck at the outlaw gang which would go far toward crushing them, or, at all events, their captive might be snatched from their hands."

"Now if Mud Turtle only succeeds in tracking the rascals to their lair he will be sure to bring me full information in regard to how matters stand," Dick Talbot mused, as he proceeded on his homeward road.

"I have no doubt that the Indian will succeed, for in a case of this kind I never knew him to fail. The information which he will be sure to gain, coupled with that which I will force from this brigand spy, will enable me to rescue Nell, and at the same time strike the outlaws a blow which they little expect."

"The first thing is to secure this disguised outlaw, for if he should escape, one important point would be lost."

Upon reaching the ranch Talbot immediately summoned the cowboys whom he knew he could trust, and revealed to them the discovery which had been made.

All were amazed, for although since the night of the brigands' attack on the ranch the idea had been prevalent among them that there was a traitor in the camp, yet so well had the spy played his cards that no one suspected him.

A plan was arranged to seize the herdsmen when he returned to the ranch, and so well was it concocted, and so skillfully carried out, that the peon was made a prisoner without being afforded an opportunity to resist, although at the moment of the surprise he showed a disposition to make a desperate fight.

With his arms bound, and his weapons taken from him, he was brought before the Ranch King.

"You are in a tight place," said Talbot. "What is the matter—what have I done?" the herdsmen demanded.

"You are a spy of Bernal, the Brigand!" The declaration astounded the man.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN ADVANCE IN FORCE.

"WHAT do you say? I, a spy of the brigands?" the peon exclaimed.

"That is exactly what I say, and that is precisely what you are!" the Ranch King replied.

"It is not so—it is a lie! I know nothing at all about them!" the man protested.

"It is of no use for you to attempt a denial!" Dick Talbot said, sternly.

"You have played a bold game, and played it exceedingly well, but you are caught at last, Sonora Jim."

Despite the man's iron nerves, the abrupt mention of his name startled him, and, notwithstanding the command that he had over himself, there was some trace of his surprise visible on his features.

The Ranch King was watching him with the eyes of a hawk and the man's agitation did not escape his penetrating gaze.

"Aha!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, "that rather astonishes you, eh? You did not expect that you would be recognized—you did not think that any one would look among the peons of the Talbot Ranch for so renowned a rascal as Sonora Jim, the right-hand man of the brigand captain, Fernando Bernal?"

"It is not so—it is a mistake," the man protested, sullenly.

"Oh, yes; of course it is natural for you to say that, but you cannot pull the wool over our eyes, for we know you! Search him, boys! he may have some proofs on his person that he is one of the brigands!" the Ranch King commanded.

And no sooner were the words spoken than Dick Talbot guessed by the look of really fiendish rage which appeared on the countenance of the prisoner that he did have some proof on his person that he was a member of the outlaw band.

That proof was quickly found.

It was an unfinished letter, bearing no address, but the text clearly showed that it was intended for Fernando Bernal.

The missive ran as follows:

"I cannot discover that the Ranch King has made any movement to raise a force of cowboys, and yet I have suspicions that he is making a move of that kind, or has already done so. The Indian, Mud Turtle, has disappeared, and no one seems to know where he has gone, when, or what business he has gone upon, and this I consider to be an extremely bad sign, for the Indian is more dangerous than any man there is on the place, and as I have a suspicion that the red-skin is on your trail, you must keep an extra good lookout; and it would be as well to warn the men to be careful about this matter, and give orders to them to kill the Indian without fail if they happen to come across him—"

And here the letter abruptly ended.

Dick Talbot read it aloud, and when it was finished vengeance was in the eye of every cowboy as they glared at the prisoner.

"Well, my man, there isn't much doubt about your guilt now," the Ranch King observed.

"I did not write the letter—I cannot either read or write—I found the paper on the prairie and picked it up thinking that it might be of value," the fellow protested, unblushingly.

"He lies, Mr. Talbot!" Cowboy Tom Martin exclaimed. "He lies when he says that he cannot read nor write, for I have seen him write and heard him read."

A couple of the other cowboys also declared that this was the truth.

The man was stubborn, though, and protested that it was not so.

"I guess we will have to try a little hanging business on you and see if we can't choke the truth out of you," the Ranch King observed, dryly.

At this moment Mud Turtle made his appearance, and his peon disguise so altered his looks that at first he was not recognized by the cowboys, and therefore great was their astonishment when they discovered that the stalwart tame Indian was the Northern red-skin.

Darker and darker grew the frown upon the face of the captured brigand, for he suspected that the dusky chief had made a successful trail.

Mud Turtle looked at the peon in bonds, and then fastened his eyes, inquiringly, upon the face of the Ranch King.

Dick Talbot explained what had taken place and read the letter which had been taken from the prisoner, and in conclusion he said:

"Now, I propose to put a lariat around this scoundrel's neck and see if I cannot force him into a confession."

The prisoner set his teeth firmly together, and the look upon his face seemed to say that this would be no easy job.

Mud Turtle shook his head.

"No want him talk," the red chief said. "Mud Turtle fix things, you bet!"

The cowboys looked astonished, and terrible was the glance of rage that the captured brigand cast upon the red-skin.

Then, leaving the prisoner to the care of the cowboys, the Ranch King and the Indian withdrew to a private apartment, and there Mud Turtle told the story of his trail.

And a strange story it was, too, that the red chief had to tell.

He related how he had followed the Jew, Mosenstein, tracked him to the lone ranch in the mountains, the supposed retreat of the brigands, and then waylaid and captured him on his return.

Talbot could not forbear smiling when the Indian related how successful he had been in forcing the Jew to make a clean breast of it.

Then, Mud Turtle told how he had left the Jew a prisoner in the old house and had scouted into the outlaws' stronghold with the idea of seeing how the land lay.

But the most astonishing part of the story was yet to come.

While lurking in ambush near the brigands' retreat Mud Turtle had recognized an old acquaintance in one of the brigands, and had taken an early opportunity to come face to face with him.

As the reader has probably anticipated, it was to the new recruit, Red Billy, as he called himself, that the Indian referred.

But Mud Turtle knew him under another name, and, possibly, the careful reader who has followed the fortunes of bold Injun Dick since we first introduced him to the public in the tale entitled "Overland Kit," has guessed who Red Billy really was.

Dandy Jim, the irrepressible Man-from-Red-Dog, had been one of Dick Talbot's strongest friends from the time that the two first encountered each other in the little mining-camp in the Reese River Valley, known as Spur City.

The Man-from-Red-Dog was firmly of the impression that there wasn't a mortal on earth who could compare with bold Injun Dick, and so, when his wandering footsteps led him into the neighborhood of the Ranch King's home, and he heard the story of how Richard Talbot's wife had been abducted by the brigands, the tale immediately attracted his attention.

He made inquiries, and soon became satisfied that Richard Talbot, the Ranch King, was indeed his old-time friend, and then a truly chivalric notion took possession of him.

Instead of going to the Ranch King and volunteering to aid him to recover his wife from the hands of the marauders, he determined to allow Talbot to remain in ignorance of the fact that he was in the neighborhood, and would endeavor to rescue the lady on his own hook.

And the plan which he formed to accomplish this feat was an extremely simple one.

He would seek out the brigands and enlist in the gang.

By this means he would be able to find out all about the captive and take advantage of some favorable opportunity to rescue her from their power.

The Red-Dogite, though, after he had become a member of the brigand band, discovered that it would be almost impossible for him to accomplish his scheme single-handed, so carefully did the brigand chief guard his valuable prisoner, but when the red-skin appeared to him and the two held a consultation, they quickly hit upon a plan.

With The Man-from-Red-Dog an inmate of the outlaws' stronghold, it would be an easy matter for him to warn Talbot when the time was ripe for a rescue, and then a sudden attack by the cowboys would be apt to result in the defeat of the outlaws and the rescue of the prisoner.

When the Indian's tale was told, the Ranch King saw at once that victory was in his grasp.

Mrs. Talbot had been transferred to the upper ranch, where Bernal had now taken up his quarters.

It had been arranged between The Man-from-Red-Dog and Mud Turtle that the attack should be made that night if Talbot could get his cowboys ready.

The brigand spy was consigned to safe quarters and messengers dispatched to warn the cowboys to assemble at a certain point, convenient to them all.

Within three hours' time the expedition was on its way, and when the shades of night gathered thick and heavy over the foothills, the Ranch King and his cowboys were concealed within a few thousand feet of the lone ranch where the brigands had their lair.

Means of communication had been arranged between the Indian and Dandy Jim, so the spy in the ranch was warned that the attacking force was at hand.

The gate which gave entrance to the hacienda was guarded night and day, although Bernal did not think there was any danger of an attack.

This night, Dandy Jim and a low-browed Mexican were on the watch.

Two hours after midnight the hoot of an owl rose on the air.

It was the signal!

The Man-from-Red-Dog grabbed the Mexican by the throat and choked him into insensibility; then he opened the gate and the cowboys stole in.

The surprise was complete; there was a brief and bloody fight, but every man in the place was either killed or taken prisoner, and among the latter was Bernal.

Mrs. Talbot was rescued unhurt, and joyful was the meeting between her and the Ranch King.

Our story is told.

The brigands were turned over to the Mexican authorities and sent in chains to Guaymas, there to be tried.

The outlaw band dispersed, and when the soldiers searched for them not one could be found.

The capture of their leader and the death of some of the best men in the gang was a fatal blow.

After the brigand affair was ended, Talbot sought in Silveropolis for the men who had attempted his life, but could find no trace of them. They had evidently heard of the Snake's failure and fled.

Once again we leave Dick Talbot in peace, his enemies confounded, and his reputation greater than ever, for no man in the district was more honored than the Ranch King.

THE END.

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That Naughty Boy. For 3 females and 1 male.
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Sic Transit Gloria Mundi. Acting charade.

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Two O'clock in the Morning. For three males.
An Indignation Meeting. For several females.
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The Noblest Boy. A number of boys and teacher.
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Not so Bad as it Seems. For several characters.
A Curbstone Moral. For two males and female.
Sense vs. Sentiment. For Parlor and Exhibition.
Worth, not Wealth. For four boys and a teacher.
No such Word as Fail. For several males.
The Sleeping Beauty. For a school.
An Innocent Intrigue. Two males and a female.
Old Nabby, the Fortune-teller. For three girls.
Boy-talk. For several little boys.
Mother is Dead. For several little girls.
A Practical Illustration. For two boys and girl.

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Mrs. Jonas Jones. For three gents and two ladies.
The Born Genius. For four gents.
More than One Listener. For four gents and lady.
Who on Airth is He? For three girls.
The Right not to be a Pauper. For two boys.
Woman Nature Will Out. For a girls' school.
Benedict and Bachelor. For two boys.
The Cost of a Dress. For five persons.
The Surprise Party. For six little girls.
A Practical Demonstration. For three boys.
Refinement. Acting charade. Several characters.
Conscience the Arbitrator. For lady and gent.
How to Make Mothers Happy. For two girls.
A Conclusive Argument. For two boy speakers.
A Woman's Blindness. For three girls.
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Natural Selection. For three gentlemen.

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Polly Ann. For four ladies and one gentleman.
The Meeting of the Winds. For a school.
The Good They Did. For six ladies.
The Boy Who Wins. For six gentlemen.
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The Sick Well Man. For three boys.

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A Persecuted Man. For various characters.
Too Curious for Comfort. For 2 males and 2 females.
Under False Guise. Several females and children.
A Sure Guide. For seven males.
The Eight Little Boys from Nonsense Land.
How They See the World. For five little girls.
The Doctor's Office. For several characters male and female.
Too Much Side Show. For a number of boys.
How Mrs. Ponderous Was Paid. For 4 young ladies.
Polywog Versus Wolypog. For numerous citizens.
Tongue and Temper. For two ladies.
Flour of the Family. For 3 ladies and 1 gentleman.
Middleton's Mistake. For five males.
A Valuable Neighbor. For one lady and one boy.
The Man of Cheek. For two males.
Mr. and Mrs. Blizzard at Home. For man and wife.
Morgan's Money. For five males.
The Courtship of Miles Standish. School Festival.

Dime Dialogues, No. 33.

The Wrong Trunk. For several male characters and one female.
Saucy Jack Lee. For four males and four females.
The Pretty Preacher. For two young ladies.
A Contrast. For two little girls.
Only Joe. For five ladies and one gentleman.
The Tables Turned. For several males.
Why Did You Do It? For a school of little children.
She Had Him Three. For 1 lady and 1 gentleman.
A Report of the Affair. For two gentlemen.
Mrs. Arnold's Misconception. For two gentlemen and three ladies.
The Year Round. For twelve impersonators.
Defending the Castle. For 2 males and 2 females.
A Perfectly Veracious Man. For 1 male and 1 female.
Sympathetic Sympathy. For 3 males and 2 females.
Ananias at Home. For one male and three females.
The Man from Bangor. 1 gentleman and 3 ladies.
Casablanca in Two Versions. For two boys.

Dime Dialogues, No. 34.

It's English You Know. For three (or six) males and eight females.
A Much Misunderstood Man. For one male and one female.
The Glass Man. For seven males.
Mrs. Podberry's Views on Education. For two females and several children, girls.
How She Managed Him. For one male, one female, and child.
The Oyster Resurrection. For two males and two females.
A Neighborly Quarrel. For two males.
Blessed are the Pure in Heart. For four females.
What the Boys Knew of it. For a school—all males.
A Warm Reception. For 2 males and 2 females.
Supposings. For ten little girls.
When I Grow up to be a Man. For six little boys.
Enforcing a Moral. For three or four males and several females.
Blaying Big Folks. For several children.
What Are Little Girls Good For? For 9 little girls.
The Bump-Scientist's Reception in Clarionville Center. For 8 males, or 7 males and 1 female.
More Than She Bargained For. For three females and one male.

Dime Dialogues, No. 35.

in the Wrong House. For 2 males and 2 females.
The Sham of It All. For 3 females and 1 male.
The Surest Proof. For several males and one female.
Too Much for Jones and Smith. For two males.
Naughty Boy Blue. For Mother Goose and several children.
Only a Working Girl. For 4 females and 2 males.
How He Got Even with His Enemy. For two males.
Mrs. Bigson's Victory. For one male and one female.
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